

The Consequences of Dissonance

A Novel in Sonata Form

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NaNoWriMo 2008

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Part I

Exposition

Introduction in the tonic

Mom and I piled into the car at about seven that morning, squeezing ourselves in amongst a laundry basket full of a bubble of my clothes, my computers, and bedding enough for one who lives in Colorado and knows what the winters can be like. Check in wasn't until four that afternoon, but there was still quite the drive ahead of us in order to get there on time and to give us some time in town for lunch and walking.

"Exciting, isn't it?" my mom said.

"Yeah, stoked," I replied with as much sarcasm as I could muster that early in the morning. "Why can't you empty-nest like all the other parents?"

She laughed. "Why would I? I get the dogs all to myself now, I can go hiking whenever I want, and hey, I can make as much spinach as I want. Maybe I'll even rent out your room"

"Hey, I like spinach too! And you know I'm going to go crazy without my pups there to keep me company."

She nodded and focused on getting us down the mountain of her driveway and onto asphalt. Steamboat is tucked nicely in a valley, and the floor of that valley is decently flat, but unless you live in the middle of the town, you're in the hills. Much as I loved the Rocky Mountains, I had no desire to go to college in my hometown, sacrificing proximity to home for a school that wasn't filled with slackers who picked the school based on its proximity to the very popular ski slope. I really was excited to be going to college, where I could get an education that was pertinent to me.

The next hour or so was spent in silence rather than our usual banter due to the early hour. I nursed my coffee for most of that time and watched as we pulled north from the town, slipping past habitation and into the densely packed wilderness, walls of building giving way to the walls of the pine forest. We wound our way up and north - up into the passes and north of the town, driving for Wyoming. Even though I was going to school almost directly east, it was faster for us to duck up to Wyoming for I-80 and head for I-25 to duck south back into Colorado to head for Fort Collins than to try driving east.

With the sun heading to the top of the sky, I drained my now chilly coffee in a few quick gulps and reached back behind my seat to tuck the travel mug into my backpack. The mug had been one of my parting gifts from my friends who still had a year left of high school, and my mom had supplemented that with a small coffee maker. I had told her I didn't like drip coffee, but she assured me that I would most certainly get more use out of that coffee maker than any of my textbooks. Hard to disagree there.

"I can't believe you picked somewhere so flat!" she exclaimed, breaking the silence of our drive to that point.

"Me either. I feel as though I'm twice as tall there and I might just tip over, like it's harder to balance or something."

"At least there are plenty trees."

"Yeah, to hide the lack of mountains."

"And you can bike easier."

“Mmhm.” I could sense where this was headed. My mom would always talk about the town before broaching the next subject.

“And why did you pick such a stuck up little cow-town? I mean, it’s not Greeley, but you could’ve gone to Boulder! Fort Collins is so... so...”

“Conservative? I know, but that’s just the town. I’ll be living in the dorms.”

“Do you think they’ll be that different?” she asked, sounding genuinely worried by now.

“I hope so,” I murmured distractedly. We’d had most of this conversation before. “You know what they say: if you’re not a liberal in college, you have no heart.”

“Well, you know the rest of that saying says that if you’re not a conservative by forty that you have no brain, and plenty of your classmates’ parents will have chosen their school for them; indoctrinated them.”

“Like you did me?” I grinned back to her sidelong glare.

“Be serious, you know what I mean...”

I nodded and sat for a bit before replying, “At least I’m not going to Wyoming.”

“I don’t think I’d let you.” Her expression turned pained, “Don’t want you to be the next Matthew Shepherd. Poor kid...”

“I know, mom. You saw the office, though, they clearly have enough gay people there for them to have an office, and to have some influence over how things are run.”

She nodded and shrugged as best as one can while holding at ten and two, a cautious driver. “But that’s a group thing. You know, sociology and what not. That’s not going to stop some crazy individual who’s convinced deep down that God hates fags and it’s their sworn duty to usher them straight to hell.”

“Well, yeah. I promise I’ll be safe,” I said dismissively. This conversation was getting worn out from how often we had had it. “And hey, maybe I’ll even meet someone local to date.”

Smirking, she replied, “You can date whoever you want, Cory, I’m not going to stop you. I am going to suggest that those internet relationships you’ve had aren’t exactly healthy, is all. Much as I liked Chris...”

Nice disclaimer, I thought. And she really had liked Chris. It was tough on both of us when that relationship had ended as poorly as it did. “I know, I know. I’ll go shopping and bring home a nice boy sometime, one of those funny ones.”

“Hey,” she said mock defensively, laughing. “I’m not the one that needs a boyfriend, it’s you. Date who you want, seriously. Jared and I will support you, whoever you wind up with.”

“Yeah,” I said distractedly. I got the feeling that Jared wasn’t exactly a big fan of having a gay step son. Mom had the final say, though, and promised me that even if that was the case, I came first for her, and didn’t have anything to worry about on that end.

Another bit of silence greeted us as the trees around the road began to thin and the omnipresent greenery shifted from the greenish blue of the pine trees to the brownish green of scrub. Wyoming was close. I hoped that meant food

was close, as well. We had planned on stopping somewhere along I-80 in order to pick something up.

“Did you ever get in touch with your roommate?” mom asked.

“Yeah, he emailed me back. Sounds like kind of a jerk,” I said, brow furrowing. “He’s in some sort of fraternity, I think. Hopefully that means I won’t see him much. Don’t know how I feel about living with someone who spells ‘cool’ with a ‘k’.”

“Great,” she muttered in response. “Now I’m really worried.”

“Don’t be, mom. You know I can take care of myself.”

“So you always say, I just don’t want you calling me to say you couldn’t prove that.”

I blinked and frowned, mildly offended at that. I stared out the window for a little bit before looking over at my mom who had the steering wheel in a while-knuckled grip. She looked genuinely worried, “I’ll talk to the GLBT student services guys about it, just to make sure I’ve got someone on my side if something happens, promise.”

She nodded and relaxed her grip somewhat, “Alright. Didn’t mean to sound rude, I just worry sometimes.”

I gave a little sigh of a laugh, “Maybe you are empty nesting.”

* * *

Full of bagel, cream cheese, and lax, Our route turned east along I-80 for the few miles it took to get to I-25. Even though I’d gotten a coffee to go with our lunch, I was still tired. When my mom asked, I told her it was how boring the bland landscape was after the relative excitement of the mountains and greenery. I had barely slept the night before. Despite trying to act cool about the whole moving to college thing, excitement really had taken its toll on me, and I had alternated between worrying in bed and worrying at my desk. I must’ve mowed through half the container of olives we had in the fridge that night, sneaking out so as not to wake my mom and Jared as I made my food raids. Those spicy olives straight from the container were one of my comfort foods. One of those things that has to be eaten with the fingers.

I suppose I’m a little weird.

The conversation wandered around a little more between my mom and my self as she shared anecdotes from her own college life and I talked about recent stories about my friends as news from the perennial diaspora of high school graduates to colleges across the country trickled back to me. “Other Cory” had wound up down in Denver at the University of Colorado’s campus there, and he had sent me a few pictures from his most recent visit down there. A few more friends from band had made their way to CU’s Boulder campus, where my mom had wanted me to go, and the Inseparable Trio of Karen, Jessie and Nate had made their way to the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, just a half hour away from where I was headed. Only one other of my friends from band — more an acquaintance than anything — had picked Colorado State University as I had, trekking over to Fort Collins along with me for visits and auditions, though he wasn’t moving in until later today.

Most of my other friends, though, had spread out much further than Colorado. Many of the other band kids had filtered down to various schools in Texas for their music and education programs down there, and one or two made their way to each coast. Their parents were loaded, though, and could afford to pay for all the plane tickets and out of state tuition that was involved in such a move.

I was comfortable heading three or four hours away, though. I felt that it was close enough to home that I could visit if I wanted once I got my car fixed over Thanksgiving break. Still, it was far enough away so that I wouldn't have to worry about my mom 'empty nesting' on me and coming over to visit, except for the concerts. Dad was down in Colorado Springs, which was a good distance away, though I didn't expect to see him quite as much. Since he was helping with tuition as well, he made in-state tuition a must. Not that I minded, I loved Colorado, it just meant that if I wanted to get away, I would have to choose my schools carefully. I knew CSU from the two times I had done summer band camp, so that was my logical choice.

Sipping my way through my coffee, I let the flattening landscape and my mom's music lull me into an empty mind. Excitement and caffeine kept me from dozing, but it felt like the first real relaxation I'd had in a while.

Dad had sent me on my way with his goofy stories from college: shooting out a street light with a .22 rifle and having to repaint twenty light posts for the city as his community service; drinking with friends; smoking enough pot at a party that he wandered into the wrong apartment when he'd tried to go home. "Just promise me you'll get a DD if you drink, be a DD when you don't, and call me once in a while," was his goodbye when I'd left for Steamboat again on Wednesday. He'd given me a check for fifty dollars and walked me out to Jared's Honda, the car I was borrowing for this last visit.

Jared had little to say to when it came to college other than to agree with most of what my mom said and offer up common sense advice on doing my homework. I had watched his own kid graduate and move off to college, which was a much bigger deal to him - he and Jennifer had gone out to dinner on their own four or five times in as many weeks before she made her way across town to the Colorado Mountain College, and they had planned everything meticulously. It was understandable, I guess. He and my mom hadn't gotten married until my Sophomore year of high school - he was just that guy that lived with us, and I was just that kid his girlfriend had from before. Didn't matter much to us that I was leaving. And I don't suppose it helped that I liked guys. I was always just a little unnatural to him.

Mom and dad had taken that whole thing pretty well, at least. There were a few long talks I had to sit through about whether or not the whole thing was a phase or not, what this meant for their hopes of grandchildren, who I would go out with, and so on, but after a while, it was all normal to them. They both liked Chris, they both had their concerns about the whole internet dating thing, and they both treated me as they always had, which I suppose was the most important thing. Say what you want about Colorado in general, but I guess when it's your kid, it's hard to freak out too much. Besides, they were both

hippies once.

The bigger concern amongs them, my parents and Jared, was that I wanted to go into music. That alone had caused more strife than coming out had.

“You’ll never make any money,” was what their arguments had come down to. Usually, it was couched in some lecture-speak, like, “There’s a fine line between doing what you love and doing what you have to do in order to live comfortably.” I had been a good kid and rarely rolled my eyes, but after watching both parents suffer through work, after watching Jared’s relief at his lay-off, and most importantly, watching Mr. Paulsen talk about how much he loved his job in music teaching our band, I had to roll my eyes at this.

The arguments went back and forth, and my only concession had been to major in music education instead of just plain music. Teaching wouldn’t be so bad, so long as I could teach music.

* * *

“Is this...? Yeah, this has to be it.” My mom muttered.

I jerked my head up from where I was half-doing against the window at the words. Blinking at the light, I looked around. From the time I had spaced out an hour or so before, the landscape had changed from brownish scrublands of Wyoming to the tan plains east of the Rockies that I knew from the drives to band camp. That had always been my dad’s deal, and this was only my mom’s second time driving to Fort Collins.

“Yeah, take this one,” I yawned. Rubbing at my face, I struggled towards wakefulness. I fumbled around and found the second half of my coffee, long cold by now, and finished it with a grimace. “Hopefully the places here have better coffee than this.”

“Can’t have you without your coffee,” my mom laughed. “Good dreams?”

“Nah, wasn’t sleeping.”

“Mhmm. Do you always drool when you’re not sleeping?”

“Sure,” I mumbled. “That’s what spit valves are for.”

She laughed and steered her way towards campus. I guided her through the move-in day traffic onto the campus and toward the dorms, letting her interrupt me as patiently as I could with her outbursts of drumming the steering wheel while sing-songing, “This is exciiiiitiiiiing!”

Following the crowds, we made it to the south end of campus slowly and pulled up along the side of the street with the other cars disgorging students and stuff.

“Glad we made it here early,” I mumbled. There were already twenty or so other families unpacking along the stretch of road, and more were visible in the parking lots on either side of the building. Looking over the bent ‘H’ shaped dorm and trying to count rooms, I grimaced at the thought of that many families trying to move their children in at once. No, I corrected myself, that many times two, what with the whole roommate thing.

Before unpacking anything, my mom and I made our way around one wing of the building toward the lobby. We stopped to pick up my key and get

directions to the room itself. Walking along the hallway to the wings, my mom was bouncing on the balls of her feet, poking fun at me for being more excited than I was.

"I'm excited, I promise. Just dreading the common restrooms."

"Aw," she jibed. "They're not that bad, I promise. Just have to get used to it. And schedule your showers for when the least amount of people are in there. And wear sandals when you do."

"Thanks mom, you fill me with confidence."

"I aim to please," she shot back.

The doors to the southwest wing on the second floor were propped open and standing just inside was a man who looked to be in his late twenties who introduced himself as Mark, the RA for the hall.

"Small!" my mom blurted as we were shown to my room. Both Mark and I laughed as we followed her in, but I had to agree with her. The far wall was taken up by a bank of picture windows, and opposite that was a bank of closets, split into two sets, one for each person, I supposed. Other than that, the room was a bit drab and depressing. The two empty walls were tan brick, though each one was partially obscured with a cork-board painted an institutional sort of off-white. Along each of those walls was a long twin bed and a wooden desk that looked functional enough, though instead of drawers, the side of the desk held shelf space. Addict that I was, I was already mentally fitting my printer onto one of those shelves and my computer down by my feet. Tight fit.

It looked all the more shabby for how empty it was: my roommate had yet to show up.

I buried my sense of disappointment about the room under the activity of moving my stuff from the car to the room, one armload at a time, with my mom. She had made me clean out my whole room at home and throw away, give away, or sell as much as I could stand to, promising that it would be better, and after lugging only my computer, a laundry basket of clothes and bedding, and a few loads of books into the room, I had to agree with her forecast. In the process of cleaning out my rooms at my mom's and dad's, I was exposed to just how much junk one person could have.

When we finished getting everything stacked on my bed, we made our way back to the car to make way for another family while we went out to lunch.

"Well, your RA seems nice," mom quipped on the winding drive off campus. "Mine, when I lived in the dorms, was a big priss. She was useless as an RA, so we just pretended we didn't actually have one."

"Yeah, he was cool," I replied distractedly, pointing her towards a little mexican restaurant I had found in my last year of band camp.

After a pregnant pause, my mom asked, "So, when are you going to come out to him?"

"I'll get around to it," I sighed. "It's not that big of a deal to me; I mean, it is normal for me. I think if I act that way, others will see it as normal, too."

Mom nodded hesitantly.

We made our way inside and ordered our food, taking our burritos and drinks to a booth out of the way near the back of the restaurant.

“I don’t mean to be such a worrywort,” my mom began, and I knew that was a disclaimer that more worrying was on the way. “But I just think that it’s something you need to worry about a little yourself. In high school, it doesn’t mean as much because you’re not living with those people, and the teachers are pretty much required by law to be okay with it. They can’t show it if they’re not, I mean.”

“Well, sure, but I’d like to think that since I’m going to a school the size of the town I grew up in, that I’d get a little anonymity from that,” I countered. “Sure I live with these people, but it’s only for this year. And besides, I can sort of... keep things down low, know what I mean? I can wait to meet people and see how they are before I go about being openly gay. Hell, I waited for fourteen years, trying to figure out how you guys would react before I mentioned it to my own parents.”

Mom laughed around her bite of food and nodded, pausing to swallow before continuing. “I know I should trust you more, but it’s my job to worry. Highschool went pretty smoothly for you, especially once you started doing so well in band, but that’s not to say that the same thing will happen here. Just saying.”

We finished in silence before making our way back out to the car, my mom tapping the “Now Hiring” sign taped up next to the door and raising her eyebrows at me. “You should think about this, Cory. You know we kind of had to skimp on your meal plan a bit, so you should probably think about getting a job pretty soon to get some food for yourself.”

I nodded as I slid into the passenger seat again, “Hopefully the market’s a little better out here than it was in Steamboat. I’d prefer to avoid working at Subway again.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t exactly your dream job, was it?”

“I worry for those who dream of working at Subway. Anyway, let’s check out this Old Town thing before I have to get back for yet another campus tour. Get to see the town before I’m buried under homework and classwork.”

As we drove up north to seek a parking spot near the long row of shops that was Old Town, I worked to reconcile my mom’s worries with my lack of them. I just hoped it would be as easy as it was in my imagination.

First theme in the tonic

I saw my mom off shortly before we were supposed to gather for our first hall meeting. She cried as she hugged me and kissed at my cheeks, whispering those same worries to me one last time before she went back to her car. I suppose the reality that I had just moved away from home hadn't set in yet, but I was admittedly a little glad to see her go. I was starting to feel like her pessimism was dragging me down and I was eager to get into life at college.

I had just enough time shift my basket of clothes to the floor and get my sheets onto the bed before Mark started hollering at the head of the hall, calling all the guys out of their rooms for the first meet and greet.

"Alright guys, for those who don't know or forgot, I'm your RA, Mark. I'm supposed to read this big spiel to you, but I can sum it up to you pretty quickly. Come to me if you've got problems with each other, with school, or with your room, but not for help with your love life. The code to the bathroom is nineteen eleven, and we'll come up with a cleaning rotation later this weekend. No candles, no incense, no smoking, no drinking, no drugs, take it easy on the loud music, and respect your roommate. Basically what I'm saying is have fun, y'all are cool, but be nice to each other and don't burn the building down."

We all laughed and went down the hall, giving our names, majors, and room numbers.

"Well, since that whole thing was supposed to take us an hour and a half and it took five minutes, why don't y'all just mingle for a bit, okay? I'm serious, get to know each other, 'cause you've got six months to go here and you're stuck where you are. No sneaking back to your room." As if to provide a role-model for us, he socked the closest guy on the shoulder and started in to introducing himself to him in depth.

We all stood around awkwardly for a bit before loosening up and starting to actually talk with each other. There was one other music major, Eric, and two art majors, Joseph and Jamen, and the four of us somehow wound up clumped together amongst the crowd of thirty two guys.

"So," ventured Jamen. "You two are majoring in burger flipping, and Joseph and I have telemarketing?"

We laughed a little shyly and nodded. "I guess that's how it goes," I said. "So.. what kind of art do you guys do?"

"Painting and graphic design," Jamen said.

"Comic book type stuff and graphic design," Joseph said, adding, "Graphic design is about the only way to make any money in the business, so it seems like every art major is also in graphic design."

Eric nodded. "Sorta the same with music, except with education."

"You an ed major, too?" I asked. Eric nodded. "I just kinda tacked it on when my parents complained that I'd never make any money."

"Yeah, my parents got on my case about that, too," Eric chuckled. "No such thing as professional choirs anymore. What instrument do you play? Or are you voice?"

"Trumpet. Pretty standard stuff."

And so it went. We introduced ourselves to the other guys on the hall, but after half an hour or so of that, we wound up sitting against the wall, two of us on each side of the hall, facing each other and talking about random things, mostly about going to what was mostly an agricultural school for a liberal arts degree.

* * *

Our check in was on Friday afternoon, and the rest of that weekend was to be orientation. Part of the whole deal was for us to do much of the activities in the orientation together as a hall and get to know each other well, what with having to live together for the next two semesters.

The whole hall went to dinner together, along with the other three halls in our wing, in what was a concerted effort to not flood the dining hall with the entire dorm's worth of students at once. The four liberal arts majors sat together again after making their way through the line for pizza and pasta, and the line for drinks. The food was a little disappointing to me, having been brought up on health food under my mom and cooking for myself or going out with my dad. Mark assured us, though, that the our dorm had one of the worst kitchens around, and that if we wanted some better food, there were better kitchens to go to in order to get it.

After dinner, there were some activities at the student center that we were all supposed to attend and supposedly enjoy, though the whole thing wound up being a blur of boredom and I spent more time picking the occasional table of free goodies such as CSU branded pens and cups than I did on the activities laid out for us. Poker and TV had never appealed to me.

I asked Mark if I could leave early and got a shrug in response.

Back at my room, I worked on setting up my computer at the minimal desk we were given. The tower just barely fit under the desk, and if I put it there, I was left with no room for my legs, so it wound up on the corner closest to the windows, where I figured it would block any sunlight from my monitor. The printer sat on one of the shelves beneath it and the shelf below that was able to hold my paper and binders and, I figured, my text books as well. There was only just room on the top of the desk for my monitor — a battered but usable CRT — and my keyboard and mouse. The corner closest to the bed had just enough room for my alarm clock.

Cozy, for certain definitions of cozy, I thought. The room was about the size of my room back at home, and I only got half the space.

I set up my pillow and blanket with my head near the desk and feet near the door so I would be close to the alarm clock and could see if anyone came in.

My clothes and laundry basket both fit in my half of the closets, and my small library of books fit fairly well into the three shelves built into the insides of the closet. Unpacked, I decided to check out the bathroom.

One nine one one, and I was in, confronted with a bathroom divided in half. On one side of the dividing wall were the urinals and stalls, and on the other, stalls for showers and a bank of sinks with mirrors. I peeked into one of the

shower stalls on a whim and decided my mom was right: the floor was that a gritty concrete painted a sort of blue. Rough enough to provide traction, but smooth enough to clean. I loathed the texture. I'd go pick up some sandals or something as soon as i could figure out where.

The rest of the evening was spent finishing my computer's setup and chatting on the 'net about the first day with a few friends on IRC and high school acquaintances over IM. I crashed at the early hour of ten or so, setting my alarm for seven.

* * *

My alarm startled me from one of those sleeps without dreams that comes with exhaustion and I nearly fell out of my bed. The narrow twin-size mattress would take some getting used to, to be sure. I sat up on the edge of my bed blearily and looked out the window across the open field separating the wings of the dorm to the northwest arm of the 'H'.

I hadn't set up my coffee maker yet, and finding a place to do so proved to be a challenge. Eventually, it wound up on the bottom shelf of my desk while my paper wound up under my printer and the binders stacked neatly under the head of my bed. Liquids above electronics equipment had gotten me in trouble before, and I was nearly paranoid now.

Coffee got me awake enough to make it to the showers with my towel, where I rinsed off quickly, standing on the balls of my feet to avoid as much contact as possible with the distressingly textured floor. At least they had water pressure to the point where I could barely stand the shower turned on to full blast. Excellent.

There was a sign taped to the doorway to the stairwell that said we would be meeting at eleven. "Good, three hours," I mumbled. Time to eat and maybe go buy books.

The eggs were unimpressive, but plentiful. I sat with Mark, who was holding his head in both hands over a cup of coffee.

"Rough night?" I asked, dousing the eggs in pepper.

"Not a morning person," he grumbled, sucking down half the cup of coffee at once. "And the coffee, it does nothing."

"Well, yeah, if you can see the bottom of the mug through a full cup of coffee, you know it's going to be worthless. Brought my own coffee maker."

"Good man, good man. Gotta say, if you want coffee, stay away from the dorms, go to one of the bajillion coffee houses out around campus."

"Yeah? Any good ones in particular?"

"Any of them are good after a month of drinking this stuff. Don't get my first paycheck until Friday."

I winced, "Yeowch. There much in the way of jobs here on campus, speaking of?"

"Sure," he nodded. "Check the campus site. They have some student job listings there."

Eggs were followed by a bowl of cereal. So much cereal. At least breakfasts were looking to be fairly enjoyable.

“Hey, uh, Mark,” I mumbled, poking at my ‘Frosted Mini Spooners’ with my spoon, the bran pillows only stubbornly soaking up the milk. “My mom told me to say, er... well, she told me to, well, to come out to you,” I continued hastily, sure that my face must be past red and well into purple.

Interrupted from his coffee gazing, Mark blinked up at me blearily. “Oh. Okay, cool.”

Anti-climax is the warp and woof of the world, but reactions like this were always a bit of a let down. The logical side of my brain argued with the illogical side, which was claiming loudly inside my head that this was a Big Deal, don’t you know, and that Matthew Shepherd died in a hospital in this town, it’s a Big Deal. “Think it’s gonna be a problem on the hall?” is what I said instead.

“Nah,” he shrugged and downed the rest of his coffee. “If they do, we can talk. Talk with the gay office, too, they can help if that happens.” He heaved himself up from his chair and made his way to get coffee and cereal. He was wearing rubber ducky print pajama bottoms.

Well, at least that’s done, I thought, staring after my stumbling RA.

I finished up my breakfast and left my tray at the window to the dish room before making my way back to my own room to pick up my class schedule. I wandered over to the student center and found the bookstore on the lower floor.

Music theory one. New books only, sixty dollars.

Introduction to music history. A used book, forty-eight dollars.

Analytic trigonometry. One used book, twenty dollars.

No books for trumpet studio, marching band, or symphonic band.

I wandered to the other side of the shelves to look for the college composition books, gritting my teeth over the price I was paying for my few books. There was a crowd around the shelf holding the books for CO150, and it took a bit of waiting before I got to the sheet taped over the shelf, listing which sections needed which books. Great, two more books for that one class.

“This is absurd,” the girl mumbled to herself, squatting down and peering at the stacks of books I was headed towards myself.

“Pardon,” I said quietly, kneeling down and juggling the books I was already holding as I reached for one of the books. She smiled and handed me the other, one of the two used copies left, taking the other for herself.

“Another thirty dollars, here you go,” she said.

“Really? Jeeze... this is, like, half of my savings!”

“I know, I should go into text book publishing.” She smirked and hefted her own stack, looking appraisingly at mine, “You got a pretty light load, though, looks like.”

Following her over to the zig-zagging line to check out, “I suppose. How many classes are you taking that you have eight... ten books?”

“Four,” she said over her shoulder. “I’m an English major. We’re sort of required to read.”

I nodded, feeling my ears redden, “Oh, yeah...”

When we reached the end of the line, she tilted her head and shifted her weight to one side so as to read the spines of my own books, “Music major?”

“Yeah, music education.”

“Mm. I guess they just lump everyone together in composition, I guess. I thought the entry exam was BS, so I skimmed on it. A basic writing class sounds just as full of BS, though. Guess I should’ve tried harder.”

I nodded with as much commiseration as I could muster. I had done my best on that exam and placed solidly into that middle level class. “I’m Cory, by the way, since we’re in the same section and all.”

“Kris,” she replied. “I’d shake your hand, but I got an armload of books, so I guess this awkward run-on sentence will have to do for now.”

We chatted our way through the line. She was the daughter of two engineers and lived in Boulder. She certainly looked the part. Two t-shirts — one brown and one pink — with band names on them; a tiered, crepe-fabric skirt the color of green tea; and her short, dishwater blonde hair done up in chaotic whorls above her head, doing little to hide the lopsided piercings in her ears: a silver hoop in each, two studs in her left ear and one in her right. She was fairly attractive, I thought, as much as I could be the judge of that. Rumpled without being dumpy, stocky, a bit of a tummy without being fat. It suited her.

We each went our separate ways after paying for our books, waving our goodbyes as I headed back to my room, dwelling on how much money it had cost for my five books. Hopefully the classes would be worth it. I hadn’t seen the bills my parents had gotten from the university, but from the way they talked, this was quite the undertaking in all aspects.

Relevant education is expensive, I thought.

* * *

The rest of that first weekend was a flurry of, I thought, useless and overwrought activity. There were two more tours of the campus, to add to the two I had already taken. There was a series of games we had to play in one of the large grassy areas to the west of the student center that were probably intended to get us to relax but were almost universally greeted with sarcasm. All the new freshmen packed together so that our sweating bodies spelled out ‘CSU’ while a photographer on the roof of the recreation center took our picture. I had a bit to do for marching band, but other than that, the first weekend of school had very little to actually do with school.

Eric, Joseph, Jamen, and I all hung out together for most of the weekend, sampling the food at a few of the other dorms around the campus and finding a few places that actually served food worth eating. Mark and I headed to a coffee shop north of campus and ran into Kris there, where we watched a woman who looked rather a lot like Kris only taller cook omelets and waffles, drinking our pricey espresso drinks and feeling out of place.

My roommate didn’t show up until Sunday night at about ten. I was just heading to bed, but since he needed to unpack all his stuff, I figured I’d stay up a bit longer and talk with him while he did so.

Thomas was a short, fit looking kid with a week's worth of stubble on his cheeks and chin, colored red, brown, and gray. He moved in a dazed sort of way, though he didn't seem particularly confused. When he talked, I could tell he was a little stoned.

"So," I ventured. "How were you able to get out of this weekend's madness?"

"I'm a sophomore, just chillin' in the dorms for another year," he drawled. "Didn't get my act together last year. Heh. 'Sides, I ain't payin' for this place, m' dad's got that covered."

I smirked and nodded, lounging back in my desk chair. The thing was something of a mockery of a rocking chair: it had two rails along the bottom like a rocking chair, but they were straight and shaped so that it only had three positions: forward middle and back. "Good thing. Bunch of bull this weekend, I thought."

Thomas chuckled in that stoner rumble of his, "Yeah, I 'member that shit. All team building and 'go rams' and hype. Fuckin' gay."

I hid my wince behind my travel mug of water.

"Anyway, 'nough of that. I'm in for journalism, how 'bout you?" he continued blithely.

"Music education."

"Oh, teacher, cool. I respect that. Whatcha play?"

"Trumpet," I replied, gesturing to the narrow case by my bed with my foot.

"Awesome," he said, nodding. He nodded for about thirty seconds, hands absent mindedly arranging books again and again on his desk. I got the feeling he was a little eccentric, like he was hearing music in his head that he was nodding to. Maybe he really was just stoned. "Hey, uh... Cory. You... y'know... smokeup at all?"

"Er... no," I shook my head. That answered that, then. "Not against it or anything, just never had the chance."

"Oh, cool, cool," Thomas mumbled, getting his stuff all put away and sprawling back on his ratty covers. "I, y'know, I'm kinda into it a bit. Heh heh. A lot, really. Just let me know if it bothers you, and I won't do it in her or anythin'."

My stomach turned a little in my nervousness. I hadn't screwed around with drugs at all in highschool, though I'd read plenty: I knew all the good sites. My parents had both talked about it some and discouraged me, each in their own way. Didn't stop me from being curious, though. "I really... well, I guess I don't care. Never been around it. I'll let you know if it bugs me."

"Mm." Thomas had pulled out his MP3 player and started fiddling with it. I sat for a bit before getting up to turn off the light, leaving my roommate with his desk lamp and music. College was a bit of a let down so far. The dorms were only passable, my roommate was questionable, and here I was already thinking about drugs, and I hadn't even had my first class. It all made me feel rather pensive about myself and my situation.

* * *

Wednesday. I'd made it through all of my classes at least once.

My schedule had Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays fairly full with only composition and symphonic band on Tuesdays, plus a large block of time that I'd scheduled for my independent study type math class. So far, all I'd done in class, though was gotten a bunch of papers: syllabi, grading rubrics, a few questionnaires. We'd played some sort of name game in all of my classes except for band, which still required another audition.

I ran into Eric a good deal at the new music building. It was quite a walk from the dorms and we both made the trek there for our early-morning classes. The fact that the building used to be the old Fort Collins High School only served to make everything seem more like my old school. The campus was open, sure, and the classes were more specific, but it was still walking around with a backpack carrying too much stuff through room-lined hallways.

Along with Eric, Joseph and Jamen took to spending a good deal of time in my room. It turned out that Jamen already knew my roommate from somewhere else, though he wasn't exactly specific where from. On Tuesday night, I came home to find a TV occupying some of the empty space by the window between our two halves of the room. Jamen and Thomas were parked in front of it watching *Starship Troopers*, and the whole room smelled a little of nag champa incense and a muskier undertone. Judging from their giggles and glassy eyed stares, I could guess how Jamen knew my roommate.

And so... Wednesday. Trudging across campus on I had sat next to Kris during composition, since she was the only person there that I knew, and we talked a little more as we made our way out of the engineering building, apparently the only place they could stuff this inconvenient class. She was into jazz and rock from Japan; I liked computers; she was raised Christian but felt more Buddhist about everything; I was apathetic, raised by apathetic parents; she wanted to be a writer, or at least an editor; I didn't want to be a teacher, but it would make me money. She was a pretty funny girl, and one of the few people I had gotten to know in my five days at school, and she apparently felt rather the same way, so we made plans to get together for lunch the next day with a few of each of our friends.

And so... Wednesday. Trudging across campus on tired feet with my mug of coffee, talking with Eric to keep from spacing out.

"Man, I'm friggin' jealous of my roommate. His classes don't start until nine. I mean, I guess that's only an hour later, but that's an hour of precious sleep," he whined.

"I hear ya." I swapped hands holding my mug so I could shake the other one out. August mornings were much warmer down here on the plains than up in the hills. "It's like.. all our academic classes are in the morning, in music, and all our ensembles in the afternoon."

"Well, it's good for us singers. We had choir in the morning in high school, and it's pretty rough."

"I guess it makes sense, yeah. Everything started at seven thirty in high school, too. Dunno why eight in the morning feels so damn early now."

"Wow," Eric laughed. "I think that's the first time I've heard you curse. Did your parents always get down on you for that?"

I felt my cheeks redden, but chuckled along with him. “Yeah, I wasn’t supposed to cuss at home, and guess I never got around to it at school.”

“Never got around to it,” Eric smiled. “Fuck. Goddamn shit,” he added and I burst out laughing at the look of relish on his face.

“Yep, fuck,” I said in response. “It’s hard to shake the feeling of living under someone else’s rules when you’ve done it for eighteen years.”

Eric nodded, “We’re free now, though.”

Walking through the underpass beneath College Avenue, the main thoroughfare of Fort Collins, I remembered about Kris, “Oh yeah, going to lunch at Parmalee with this girl I met in my composition class and some of her friends. Noon. Want to come, too?”

“What? Meeting girls already? You band kids are such players,” Eric laughed as I socked him in the shoulder.

“It’s not like that, I promise,” I said, adding silently, ‘I don’t go for girls.’

“Sure, that’s what you say now. Anyway, yeah, I’ll come along. I think Joseph has class, but if I run into him, I’ll get Jamen to come along too, if you want.”

“Yeah, go ahead. You’ll probably see him before I do.”

Eric nodded and waved, ducking up along a more northerly path towards his class as I continued on toward the front of the building and my theory class to review what I’d already learned in highschool.

Theory was followed by history, where I spent more time looking at the teacher than listening to him talk. I shook myself out of it a few times, trying to convince myself to pay attention. I’d always catch myself staring again; at least it looked like I was paying attention. He was a grad student and a bit of a looker. He reminded me of Jamen

I had a spare hour after history before a mandatory meeting of the music department and I decided against the long walk home if I’d have to walk back. I walked around for a few minutes before I found a few chairs on the landing of the grand staircase above the entry way to the school. I picked one in the corner and pulled out a book to read, but I wound up getting distracted by the singers next to me talking and laughing, letting myself get caught up in their conversation.

The departmental, the meeting I had to go to, turned out to be just a bunch of rules I’d already read, so I spent most of the time zoning out. I had skipped breakfast and was looking forward to lunch. Food and friends.

Despite time dragging its heels, eleven fifty rolled around before too long and Eric and I hurried out of the music building. The dorm we were eating at, Parmalee, was most of the way across campus, and we weren’t even technically on campus. We walked quickly and laughed as we talked along the way. We even met Jamen in the plaza in front of the student center by chance and dragged him along with us, easily overcoming his objections of wanting to take care of his math homework, the same type of stuff I was supposed to be doing.

We were only five minutes late for our noon o’clock lunch at the dorm and waited to be swiped in to see Kris and one of her friends loitering just past the

entrance. She smirked at us as we waited to have our IDs scanned, tapping at her decidedly watch-less wrist. I gave her a helpless shrug and a stupid grin.

“Hey Cory,” she said, gesturing to her friend. “This is Erin, my roommate.”

“Nice to meet you. This is Eric,” I gestured in turn, feeling stupidly formal as I did so. “And Jamen.”

There was an awkward pause for a moment before Kris burst out laughing and we all chuckled, “Effin’ stupid. We gotta get food before I implode.”

We made our way across the dining hall and then down a narrow hallway to what was apparently another section of the cafeteria, Kris explaining over her shoulder, “Parmalee and Corbett are attached at the kitchen. The Corbett side’s better. All sorts of Mexican and stuff over there.”

We split up when we got to the Corbett side and each went to one of the different ‘restaurants’ they had over there. Kris, Jamen, and I wound up waiting in line for quesadillas while Eric and Erin sought out one of the main entree lines; they seemed to be hitting it off fairly well.

“So how’s the whole school thing going for you guys?” Kris asked, leaning back against one of the poles of the rope barrier, standing on the base with her heels so that it didn’t tip over.

“Good enough,” I mumbled. “Boring so far.”

Jamen shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest, “Too much politics.”

“Wow, already?” Kris winced.

“Yeah. You can tell some of the teachers don’t like the others in the art department, and there’s all this seniority crap that some people take way too seriously.” Another shrug, then, “Oh well, it’s all good. How ’bout you?”

“Oh, I dunno, I’m having fun so far.” She nodded her head at me as she said, “Our comp class is a bunch of crap. I think our teacher’s a fundamentalist.”

I laughed and nodded, “She’s pretty nuts.”

Jamen grinned and nodded, “Mine too. We started talking about writing arguments, like how to argue a point, and she wants us to focus on gay marriage this semester.”

“So? What side are you going to write about?” Kris asked. She had gotten there before me. It was one of those innocuous questions that could tell you about your friends before you outed yourself to them. Couch it in a current news item.

“Well,” Jamen mumbled, blushing now that he was on the spot. “I’m all for it. Gay marriage, that is.”

“Good!” Kris laughed and looked pointedly at me, “I’d have to question your taste in friends, Cory, if Jamen here was against it.”

I blinked, taken aback, “Er? Well... why?”

“Well, my brother’s gay, but too lazy to be an activist about it, so I do it for him!”

We laughed a bit and I swallowed the rising bile — I had been worried that she knew that I was gay and was about to blurt that out in front of Jamen. I had wanted to tell everyone on my own terms.

Jamen, being the first in line, got his quesadilla first and wandered off to the table that Eric and Erin had picked out and were already holding an animated

discussion over. Kris watched him go, then looked at me side-long, “And you are too, aren’t you?”

Stunned once more, I nodded a little bit.

“It showed in your reaction.” She looked at me a little more intently and laughed, “Hey! Relax! I just said I was alright with it, didn’t I? Its not like I’m gonna shun you and tell all your friends.”

I must’ve relaxed visibly because Kris giggled again and gave me a half-hug, one hand taken up by her quesadilla on a plate. I returned the hug awkwardly. With her hair, she came up to about my nose. She smelled like peppermint. “Just relax, get your food.”

* * *

“C’mon, Cory. You take friggin’ forever.”

I threw my binder into my backpack and tucked the New York Times in along with it, zipping the thing up so quickly that neatly perforated a corner of the paper that hadn’t quite made it in all the way. “Sorry, sorry... wasn’t paying attention.”

“You’re worse than a girl, boy,” Kris laughed. “Hell, you’re almost worse than Erin.”

Now that it was a few weeks into the semester, classes were picking up. Our composition teacher had required us to get a newspaper at least once a week and write a one page basic analysis of one of the articles in it for every Tuesday’s class. Kris and I had gotten in the habit of doing that on Tuesday afternoons before class in my room; me working on my desktop and Kris on her laptop so that she could use my printer. She always finished before I did.

I bounced out of the room as she held the door open for me, letting it shut heavily behind us as we walked quickly down the hall.

“Man, I hope that didn’t wake Thomas.” I said, “He was pretty zonked out.”

“Poor boy must not be sleeping well,” Kris said, sounding worried. It had caught me off guard, originally, that the little anachronisms of her speech sounded so natural coming from her.

“Oh, come on, you don’t really believe that, do you?”

She laughed and shouldered me against the wall, “Course not, he was stoned out of his gourd.”

September had taken an edge off the heat of August, but only a bit. It was still warm enough for t-shirts and, for the adventurous and slightly fashion challenged Jamen, shorts outside, so Kris and I speed-walked to the engineering class from my dorm unencumbered by heavy clothing, dodging guys on longboards and girls on cruiser bikes.

My back was sweaty from hauling my pack by the time we got to class, just barely avoiding being late. I sat forward in my chair and tugged the damp t-shirt away from my skin, pulling on it a few times to help cool myself down. Kris made a gagging face at me and I stuck my tongue out at at her.

“At least this building has AC,” I murmured to her, hushing up quickly and looking apologetic when the teacher gave me a Significant Glance.

“Alright, pass your papers to the aisle and up to the front,” the teacher said in that insufferable whine she had for a voice.

I pulled my paper out and handed it to Kris, getting my New York Times out as well and putting it in front of me, relaxing back against the seat a bit as the papers percolated to the front, the class then going from person to person to give a brief synopsis of the stories they had written about. I’d picked something about how global warming was viewed in the UK, and Kris had picked a story about book banning.

Class plodded along dully and I spent most of the remainder of the hour and a half trying to see how close together I could draw concentric circles with a ball-point pen without them touching, taking up most of the margins of my newspaper. I spoke up once or twice in the discussion about appeals in an argument, enough to get me credit in the class. Having been in school long enough now, I had come to agree with Kris — college comp was bullshit.

When we were finally free to go, Kris and I walked back to my place much more slowly than we had to get to class, drifting across the plaza almost without direction.

“Alright, so if I were to design a curriculum to teach English majors writing,” Kris began. She talked about this almost every time after composition. “I’d probably drop all this BS about arguments. They’re teaching us as if we all plan on going into politics and we need to come up with rebuttals to proposals. The appeals stuff is cool, at least from a fiction standpoint. I mean, it’s kinda cool to see how pathos and logos turn up in novels. Real novels, not that trashy sci-fi you read.”

“Hey! It’s not trashy! It’s legitimate writing! At least, the stuff I read. No little green men or anything.”

Kris laughed.

“Speaking of debatably legitimate writing, want to go see the new Batman movie tonight? Haven’t been to a movie in this town yet.”

“Sure, I guess.” Kris shrugged, “Mind if Erin comes along? She’s all gung-ho about it. Plus, she can drive. The theater isn’t exactly walking distance from campus.”

“Erin, huh? That means Eric’s going to have to come along, too.”

“Oh, come on, he’s your friend!” she laughed

“I know, I know,” I replied. “They’re just so... disgustingly cute together. They need to just, like... officially start going out and quit teasing us all.”

Kris elbowed me in the side, “What, you have a problem with them being close?”

I elbowed back, just because. “No, it’s not that. I just think it’s a little quick for them to already be getting into a relationship.”

“Whoa now, you just said they should get together...”

“Jooooookiiiiing,” I sang out.

“Jaaaaackaaaass,” Kris mimicked.

We piled back into my dorm room to find Thomas lounging on his bed with his Beastie Boys turned up to eleven.

“Hey, buddy!” I shouted over the rap. “If you’re going to listen to nineties music, can you maybe turn it down so we can talk?”

Convulsing with chuckles, he pawed at the remote to his stereo, knocking it off the bed. With Kris laughing, I grabbed at it and turned the music down to a somewhat saner level. I hadn’t heard Intergalactic since middle school, and although I liked it then, I wasn’t about to start listening to it again any time soon.

Plopping down in front of my computer and unlocking it, Kris directed me to the theater’s website so that I could look up showings for the movie, simultaneously trying to rouse Eric over IM.

“Here, I’ll get Erin,” Kris mumbled, tugging her laptop from her backpack to wake it up, the very tip of her tongue poking from the corner of her mouth as she typed in her password.

“Whoa now, why don’t I have either of you in my contacts? C’mon, what’s your IM?”

She giggled a little and rocked back on the bed just as a program, my instant messaging client, started flashing in the task bar on my own computer. Clicking on the flashing window, I brought up the window, ‘Message from krisTALsaidso’. My hands whacked away at the keyboard.

krisTALsaidso: asdfjklasdfj;asdf

CoryroC: Dork. How did you get my sn?

Kris punched me in the shoulder. “I’m right here, son. Don’t like computers nearly enough to IM someone sitting right next to me.”

Laughing and leaning away from her, I replied, “Well, how’d you get my name, then?”

“Well, Eric’s my friend, too,” she shot back.

“Oh. Duh, sorry.” I closed the window and scrolled for the Batman show times. “What’s the ‘TAL’ stand for, anyway.”

“The... awesome... lemur?” She wound up as if to punch me again, grinning as I shied away. “My name’s Kristal, dear. Though if you ever call me that, I may just miss your shoulder the next time I hit you.”

Thomas laughed from the other side of the room, a hollow ‘hu hu’ sound. “Kriiiiistal.”

“Shut up, stoner!” She threw my travel mug at the kid.

“Maybe woul’nt be so touchy if you just got a little hiiiiigh,” Thomas sighed the last word before convulsing with his cuckles once more, rolling onto his side away from us and curling up some. His already slurred speech always got that much worse when he was really gone.

“Alright, children,” I interrupted. “There’s one at six thirty, Kris, that good?”

“Mmn,” she chewed on her tongue a little more as she typed away at her own keyboard. “Yeah, Erin says that’s fine, too. Eric’s at her place anyway.

Gotta, like, wolf down dinner first, though. It's already five fifteen."

"Really? That far away?" I asked incredulously.

She grinned at me, "C'mon, the previous are the best part!"

I pulled a face, but dutifully locked my computer again as she stuffed her computer back into her backpack, kicking the bag under my bed with her heel. We marched in lockstep down the hall for no particular reason and then I tried to walk along with her so that our steps made a swing tempo, but I must've looked too goofy trying that, because she rammed me into the wall again. I wasn't quite sure why we were so elated, but wasn't about to start complaining.

Dinner passed in a hurry, and we ran halfway to Parmalee to catch up with Erin and Eric, stopping only when our stomachs cramped. Soon enough, the two of us were piled into the back of Erin's coconut scented white Honda Accord so as to make the trek down to the theater, which really was on the outskirts on town.

Walking from the car to the theater, Kris tugged at the sleeve of my shirt, dropping back with me a little bit so that she could raise her eyebrows and gesture towards our two friends. Eric and Erin were walking close enough together that it was difficult to see, but their fingers were intertwined. Not quite holding hands, but some subtle medium that seemed all that much more intimate for the differences.

Taking a double step, I caught up with Eric and gave him a pat on the shoulder, though he jumped as if I'd slapped him, looking bashfully back toward me and sneaking his hand back into his pocket. I grinned as disarmingly as I could while nodding in what I hoped was an approving fashion.

He smiled back gratefully and I saw his hand slip back out of his pocket to seek Erin's again, though she seemed decidedly distracted by Kris leaning against her in order to nudge her closer to Eric. Not quite as subtle, I thought.

The guys got the girls' tickets — Eric out of some sense of chivalry and me because of the distressingly well-practiced puppy-dog eyes Kris gave me — and we all made our way into the theater. Picking some seats out somewhere in the middle despite Kris' pleas for the first row, we sat together, the boys on the outside surrounding the girls. The lights were already half-dim and some sort of pre-show set of commercials was running in lieu of a slide show, affording us some opportunities to jeer at network TV's new blunders and a rather blatantly patriotic music video.

The lights finally dimmed to darkness as the screen flickered towards real film and the previews. Kris golf-clapped excitedly and then surprised me by tugging the armrest up from between us and leaning in against me. I stiffened somewhat in my seat before relaxing again a little, shrugging it off.

I'd never understand the girl's random displays of affection with me.

* * *

"Nah, man, that stuff makes me feel stupid," I said, pawing Thomas' poffered joint on towards Kris who plucked it delicately from my roommate's fingers.

"Hope you don't mind, Cor'," she said, relighting the end of the pungent bit of pot, the newly rolled joint glowing red at the flame and releasing a tiny curl

of smoke towards the light in our room, which Thomas had covered in a bit of green-tea colored cloth.

I shrugged and propped myself up with my elbows on my bed, handing the ‘sploof’ on to Kris, which she exchanged for her lighter. “It’s cool,” I said. “Just don’t like it myself. As long as you don’t get us all in trouble, I’ll be fine.”

Nodding distractedly, she huffed out through the sploof. It was an old Mountain Dew bottle stuffed with what appeared to be a cut up sock and a fist-sized clump of fabric softener sheets. The cloud of smoke that puffed out of the hole melted in the bottom of the bottle didn’t exactly smell like fresh mountain breezes as advertized, but then, it hardly smelled like much at all, rather than the rather distinct odor of pot smoke.

I knew the ritual; Thomas would pile a towel at the base of the door, smoke up, and then light a stick of Nag Champa for five seconds. Or ten, depending on how stoned he got and how slow that made him count. I’d gotten on him more about the smell of incense than the smell of pot. The stuff bugged my nose.

Kris took another hit or two from the joint before licking her thumb and forefinger and pinching what was left of the cherry on the pot, putting it out with a staccato hiss. The half-smoked stub disappeared into the oboe reed tube that Eric had provided Thomas with (and Thomas had passed on to her) from his double-reed techniques class. That found its way into her backpack and was exchanged for a ten dollar bill, which made its way over to Thomas, who was busy slipping himself into a hoodie that was probably a size or two too small for him.

“Ciao, kids,” he mumbled, stumbling over to the door with the rest of his baggie of pot secreted in his back pocket. “See ya... uh... whenever, I guess.”

“Have a good night, weekend, whatever period of time,” I called after him as the door shut. I shrugged, “Probably won’t see him until Monday night.”

Kris nodded and crawled onto the bed with me on hands and knees, doing a graceless faceplant into my covers as if she was bowing down to my opera poster. She giggled there, muffled by my comforter, before nearly a minute. Unable to restrain myself, I gave her a little push on her hip and tipped her over onto my bed where she smiled at me languidly from my bed. “music,” she uttered.

I grinned and shook my head, levering myself up enough to hit my spacebar and unpause the sound. Some jazzy, Japanese stuff that Kris had turned me on to melted out of the speakers as languidly as the girl’s smile. I turned back to find her tugging here and there at my comforter, searching for the edge of it to pull up over herself. She always got cold when she smoked. I lifted up a bit to tug the blanket from beneath me and threw it over her. She wriggled against the bed and kicked about until her feet found purchase and she slid herself moreunder the cover, leaving only her calves and feet exposed over the edge of the bed.

“Mmf.” What appeared to be a head lifted a bit, then fell back down heavily. “Smells like you.”

“Gross.”

“I know, fuckin’ sick, dude.” Giggling ensued.

I didn't believe in contact highs until recently. I'd tried pot enough with Thomas and Jamen enough to know that I either freaked out or felt too stupid to enjoy it. Thomas had introduced Kris to it at about the same time, and she had taken to it much more than I had. I still didn't think I really got a contact high from just being around it, but since my moods had started to mirror Kris' so much when she was around, I tended to relax and get a little goofier around her when she was this relaxed and goofy.

I levered myself up off the bed to shut the window against the mid-October chill that was starting to be felt in the room, thinking that I'd be already wearing my jacket up in Steamboat at this time of year. I wound over to the mini-fridge that Thomas had mysteriously procured and offered to share with me and pulled out a beer, one of the few vices I allowed myself in the dorms. Another gift from Thomas, I thought wryly. Clearly, stoners were something to be reviled. Pff. I opened the bottle from my multi-tool before climbing back onto the bed and sitting at the head of it, crosslegged and leaning back against the side of my desk.

"Can you breathe alright under there?" I asked, brushing my foot up over the rounded lump that was probably Kris' head. "Not suffocating in those me-fumes?"

A hand slithered free of the covers and then peeled them back over her head to free it somewhat. "You. Smell like. Pine. Trees." Every word was a sentence, and the whole paragraph was apparently giggle-worthy.

"Thankee," I laughed, drinking down some of my beer and setting it on the corner of my desk. I leaned back to watch as Kris levered herself up off the bed in a way that indicated that she weighed nearly four hundred pounds, clawing her way up the bed. "Hey!" I laughed, oofing as her hands wound up on my crossed legs and chest, the girl crawling over me a little in order to stretch out a wavering arm and make a desparate grab for my beer, almost tipping it over in the process.

"Thanks, boy," she muttered, taking a swig from the bottle. The swig turned into a few swallows and by the time she came up for air, she had downed almost a half of the bottle. "Chivalry's dead," she huffed, then let out a belch larger than I could ever muster.

"You, my friend, are disgusting." I laughed as she glared at me with crossed eyes. "Drunk and stoned."

"I know," she whined at me and set the beer bottle shakily down on my desk again, sitting up at now. "It's all some ploy for you to get me in bed, I'm sure."

"Dude, I think you got that backwards," I laughed again. "Besides, you're already in my bed."

She squeezed her eyes shut in my direction and burped at me again. "Yep. Cold."

There was another fuss with the blankets, but she wound up wrapped in them once more, looking to be a navy blue lump, a rocky isle in the middle of the sea of my lighter blue sheets. I giggled as I struggled to extend the metaphor to her head poking free of the blanket, coming up with a much more

proportionally accurate vision of Easter Island.

“Laughin’ at me,” she mumbled and snaked an arm around to pinch at my calf.

“Well, yeah,” I grinned, squirming at the pinch.

“Jus’ tryin’ to get me into bed,” she laughed. She repeated herself a lot while stoned.

I rolled my eyes and nodded, not even bothering to correct her a second time.

“Then you won’t mind,” she said, talking more clearly than she had been.

I looked up curiously just in time for her nose to bump against my own as her lips were mashed to mine in a clumsy sort of kiss.

Surprise made my whole body jerk out of its half-dazed relaxation into a state of tenseness. I managed to keep myself from making any sort of sound as her face hesitated against my own, my mind already rushing as it struggled with the idea of being kissed by a girl. A girl. Female, short, soft skin, has breasts and a vagina, hardly even the same species. Also, sensitive and prone to taking offense. I tore through corridors of words seeking the ones that would explain how I felt without destroying a friendship and finding none.

I’m sure my lack of response to the gesture tipped her off as to what was going on, though, because Kris settled back away from me, a look of horror on her face as it got redder by the moment. “Oh, God,” she breathed, settling back onto her haunches. “Oh, Jeez, I’m sorry, Cory. Fuck...” She scuttled back on the bed, belying her inebriated state, in order to sit at the far end, staring at me for an awkward second before shouting, “Fuck! God damn it.” She threw the comforter up over her head and I could see her cross her arms over her knees and bury her forehead against them.

I sat stunned for a moment longer, trying to parse this strange twist in our friendship. I was brought out of my stupor by the sight of Kris’ shoulders shaking beneath the folds of the blanket. “No, no, no,” I said softly as I crawled across the bed toward the navy lump at the foot of it.

Settling next to the pile of covers and girl, I wrapped my arms around the whole thing as best as I could, hugging around Kris’ shoulders and around her knees in an echo of her own arms. “Shh, it’s okay,” I cooed under my breath. “I just wasn’t expecting it.” I kept at it for what felt like half an hour but was probably only a few minutes.

A squirm interrupted me. “Cor, let me up. Can’t breathe,” she said muffledly. I laughed a little nervously and relaxed my grip around her so that she could tug the flap of comforter she’d thrown over her head free and lift her head. She sat there for a few seconds, breathing the cooler air of the room. Her face was dry, but her eyes were a little red and her eyelashes were clumped together, free of make up as always, but damp with tears.

“You alright?” I hazarded.

“m way stoned,” she giggled a little, sniffing noisily afterwards. “Sorry ’gain, bro.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said cautiously. “Guess I over reacted.”

“Doofus,” she muttered, shifting her weight against me and resting her head on my shoulder. “You didn’t react at all. Dunno what I was expecting, kissing gay boys.”

I didn’t really know what to say, so I just hugged my arms all the tighter around her. All I could think about was that suddenly all her affection towards me in the last month made a lot more sense. Thoughts raced around my in my head

We must’ve sat there for half an hour or so. Song after song passed through the playlist. Kris straightened out her legs and freed her arms from the blanket at one point and I tried to free my own arms, but she held onto my elbow, keeping my arm around her front while her fingers drummed lazily to the beat of the song. Strange as the situation was, she was still stoned, and she’d talked plenty about how awesome this band sounded when she could ‘hear so much more.’

I made up my mind when the playlist looped back to the beginning and tried to speak. Finding my throat totally devoid of moisture, I swallowed a few times before mustering up, “Kris, I.. well, you know I’m not angry with you or anything and—”

She cut me off by shaking her head and leaning away from me somewhat. “No, don’t want your platitudes. Or whatever.” She mumbled on, “Not the right word. Don’t want your... stuff.”

“No, Kris, I’m not trying to give platitudes—”

“No ‘pologies, then.” She looked stubborn and tired.

Desperate to get it out before I lost my nerve, I raised my voice. “Kristal god damn Careen, I fucking liked it.”

“No— what?” She stifled a laugh, “You suck at cussing.”

We stared at each other for a moment or two before I leaned in to place another, more delicate kiss on her lips, very belatedly returning her gesture.

She softened up after only a second of contact, and we each relaxed against the other, holding the contact for a few seconds before leaning back against the wall.

“You suck,” she muttered, smiling as she did so. She levered my arms from around her and kneaded her hands against my shoulder much like a cat on a favorite blanket, pushing me over onto my side before slinking up along the bed to spoon against me rather decisively, giving me little choice.

I laughed a little, but stayed tense, arms held still and awkward.

“I hate you.” Then, “Hold me, you dork.”

* * *

I woke with a start. The music was stopped, but my computer’s monitor was still on, the simply displaying the time in one corner. What passed as a screen saver for me. I was cold and thirsty, and the only thing near by was the half-full beer bottle. I grabbed at it and held onto it for a moment before deciding against it. I needed water. At least the bottle, by the slight chill, told me I hadn’t been asleep too long.

I climbed clumsily over the sleeping form in my bed and stumbled to my desk to grab my travel mug, slipping out of my room and pulling the cable-lock between the door jam and door so that I wouldn't be locked out. Shuffling down the hall toward the drinking fountain, I brushed my rumpled clothes out and tugged my shirt down over my pants absent mindedly and somehow still self-consciously to hide the slight tent there. Morning wood strikes, even at twelve thirty at night.

It wasn't until I was rinsing the coffee taste from my mug that the rest of the evening came back to me. Holy crap, I thought. There was another person in my bed. And it was a girl! My ears reddened at the thought, then reddened further as I felt my erection, that traitor, subside now that I was more awake. I was still too tired to think the whole thing through, but not too tired to be embarrassed about it; hopefully Kris hadn't noticed.

I downed a glass of water and filled my mug again before heading back to my room, slipping quietly into my room once more and letting the door shut as quietly as possible. Kris was still breathing heavily from my bed. I shuffled toward the sound as I struggled to see in the dark. Questing fingers finding the fabric of my sheets, I sat myself down on the edge of the bed and took another sip of water.

"Mm, Cor," Kris slurred and reached out a hand, only to whack me in the side. She pulled herself around closer to me and blinked at me sleepily. "Tha' water?" she mumbled.

I nodded and took one last sip before sacrificing the rest of the mug to She Who Likely Had Cotton Mouth Pretty Bad.

I shook myself some. I was already thinking in terms of endearment.

Kris propped herself up on one elbow as she slurped at the water noisily, getting halfway through it before coughing violently. I took the cup from her before she spilled the rest on my bed and patted her between the shoulders, "Swallowing, s'one of those key skills," I murmured.

She punched me feebly in the side before finishing her coughing fit and scooting up behind me some, half-curling around my lower back, keeping her head propped up on her fist. "Dork."

"Mm," I agreed.

She seemed to tense up as she woke up a little more, leaning away from me a little cautiously, "Sure you're okay with earlier?"

"No," I said, shaking my head and reaching around behind her to lean back onto my hands, effectively trapping her where she was. "Not sure," I added. "Not yet."

Kris nodded and folded her arm in and down like origami, resting her head on her bicep. "Lemme know when you are." She added quietly, "Or if you aren't."

We stayed quiet for a few minutes.

"It," I began, then paused. "I mean, I liked it, and that's why I'm not sure." I sounded stupid and trite to myself, like I was quoting lines from a movie. I shrugged it off.

"Mm."

I sat up a little and pushed at her side a little, “Scoot, I want to lay down.”

Kris wiggled herself back across the bed until she was near the wall and I was struck again by how narrow the beds were. I hoped my body wouldn’t make too much of an ass out of me in such close quarters. I stretched myself out along the bed again anyway, facing the girl — girl! — who had kissed me, and I had kissed back. She smiled sleepily and lifted her arm, holding the covers for me and looking for all the world like a stoned parody of Batman spreading one of his wings.

I shifted myself a little closer toward her and gratefully let her drape the covers over me. Her hand dropped over my side and she gave a feeble sort of tug, a pained ‘c’mere’ look on her face. I giggled a little and scooted in a little closer, resting my hand on her side, just above the waistband of her pants. This wasn’t satisfactory, I guess, because she pulled at me a little more forcibly, straightening her legs out as she tugged herself up to my front. I gave in and let my arm slip down around her back.

I had closed my eyes at some point, but opened them again when I felt her nuzzling her face in against my own questioningly. I paused only for a second before responding to the advances, finding her lips with my own easily in the dark.

We shared delicate, exploratory kisses for a while as I tried to banish the thought that the feeling of her breasts against my front was a constant reminder of her gender and my previously stated preference. The thoughts were still whirling in my head, the reminders of homosexuality battling with the desires for closeness with the one who was here with me now.

The kisses moved past that exploratory phase filled with smooching and pecking and into decidedly more intimate ‘real’ kisses, as I’d called them in the past. Kris still tasted a little like smoke, but it was a smaller part of the whole, just one chord in the whole flavor of her. I was marveling the differences between this act as I had shared it with the two boyfriends I’d had and Kris when she slipped back from me. She rearranged herself, slipping her left arm up under the pillows while her right tightened around me. I hugged onto her a little more in return.

“I’m tired, Cor,” She mumbled.

“Kay.”

“And we’re rushing.”

I tilted my head against the pillows some.

Kris rolled around after a second or two to spoon back against me once more, “You were trembling.”

I kept my arm loosely around her while she got comfortable and forced myself to relax. I found myself surprisingly tense. “Oh. Sorry.”

“Mm. We’ll figure things out tomorrow. Sleep now.”

* * *

I had the drapes pulled closed enough to shield my monitor from the sun glaring off the snow outside. The second week in November and we had only

just now had our first snow. People told me it was a dry year, but I still felt as though I was living in some place vastly different than home; a place where I didn't have to clear the sidewalks starting in October.

I stared dully at the screen as my half-finished theory ear-training homework sat open and waiting for me to finish, the music player paused. I had gone beyond frustration at the exercise, wafted through apathy, and now, my brain had simply turned off. I was closer to meditating than day-dreaming.

Understandable, then, that the sound of my phone made me jump as much as it did. Recognizing my mom's number on the external display, I unclipped the cell from its charger and took the call, "Hello?"

"Hi!" Mom always sounded chipper on the phone.

"Hey mom. What's up?"

"Oh, not a whole lot here. Just got back from hiking with the dogs. Got tired of emailing you, so I figured I'd call in stead." I could hear the smirk as she continued, "You know, you could try it once in a while. I know you don't have a whole lot of minutes, but that's no excuse not to call home more than once a month."

I laughed, "Sorry, mom. Just been kinda crazy here."

"Yeah? Tell me all about it. I need more college anecdotes to pass around work."

"Oh, nothing that exciting," I dismissed. "Class, and homework, and more class. At least concerts and midterms are over."

"Yeah? How did those go? Sorry again Jared and I couldn't make it out there for your concert."

"Oh, don't worry about it. The music wasn't very good, anyway. Midterms went fine, not as big a deal as I thought."

"Good, good. And school's going well overall? I have to ask that, you know. They make us sign something when we have kids promising to nag about school."

I laughed, "I bet. It's going fine. Lots of people here, pretty crazy."

"Always is. Meet anyone yet?" she asked suggestively.

"Well... sorta," I admitted, ears turning hot. I hadn't really thought of how to prepare myself for a reverse coming-out. "It's... weird. I don't want to jinx it, though. I'll tell you later."

Mom laughed, "Alright, alright, keep your secrets. Anyway, the real reason I called was to let you know that your car's fixed. I'll come pick you up at around noon on... not this saturday, but next, I guess it is. Then you can drive yourself back to school when break's over."

"Oh, awesome. Thanks for helping me out with that."

"Of course, hon. Besides, it's like an investment. Put money into your car so we don't have to pay for gas ferrying you around anymore." She laughed, but it sounded strained, "It pays off in the long run."

"Mm. Well, thanks again. I gotta get going to class here pretty soon. See you next Saturday?"

"Sure thing, Cory. Have fun with the prospective boy."

I bit my lip and made a generic sound of agreement. “Talk to you later, mom. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

She hung up and I stared at the phone for a while.

Plugging the cell back into the charger, I was interrupted by a knock, startling me. I levered myself up and shambled over to the door. “Oh, shit, Eric. Hey, come on it!”

I propped the door open and let my friend slip into the room, Eric making a bee-line for my bed, where he dropped himself gracelessly. “So! Double date, huh?”

I laughed and made my way back to the computer, making a note on my homework where I had left off. “Guess so. Always seemed like such a highschool thing to do. Even dating in general, man,” I shrugged. We had had our fair share of discussions about the matter.

“Yeah. Kinda bogus,” he shrugged. “Whatever, though. Gotta keep the girls happy. How you even wound up with one is beyond me.”

I smirked and flipped him off kindly, getting a laugh for my efforts. “So what’s the plan, then?”

“Well, I guess they’re both coming over here sometime in the next few minutes, then we’re all going for a cold, romantic march across campus to get some dinner. Dunno after that.”

“Alright. Well, shit, guess I’d better get myself pulled together.” I locked my computer again and patted at my pockets to make sure I had the necessary keys and credit card before hunting around in the pile of clothes that had accumulated in my closet for my jacket and boots.

Eric’s phone rang just as I was tying my shoes, so I doubled my pace, guessing at who was on the other end. Of course, judging from the expressions he used and how... cute they were, I hardly needed to guess. I was up and ready to go by the time he had hung up, so we trudged our way out of the dorms and down the flight of stairs to see the two girls peering in the windows of the stairwell to watch for us.

Kisses were exchanged amongs the two couples, though the ceremony was cut short by complaints about the temperature, so we started to walking.

Cutting across campus is no simple deal. I had long ago decided that there had to be a reason for it being so hard to get from one end of the campus to the other, and that it had been someone’s idea to try to make it easier for students going from one class to the other back when there were less buildings. Now, however, the four of us wound our way through narrow roadways and alleys between the various buildings, sticking mostly to the cleared sidewalks except to kick at the occasional clump of snow or, in Kris’ case, to grab a fistful of the stuff to throw at me. How friendly of her.

We made our way across College, though and then across Laurel, the street that bordered the north edge of campus, and stomped our way into our destination, a restaurant that had appealed to all of us. The food was homey and warm, cooked to order, but it was still ‘quick food’, not quite fast food, but certainly prepped ahead of time as much as possible.

Taking the numbered card that would guide our server to our table, Kris slid into the booth with enough speed to bump up against the far wall, then handed me her glass with a bat of her eye-lashes. "Whatever clear soda they have, boy."

"Right, Dr. Pepper it is," I countered, sauntering over to fill both of our glasses with soda. I had ordered vegetarian, which, logically, meant that I could allow myself a glass of Dr. Pepper. Kris, who never seemed to change from her current figure, always got the same thing, it seemed. Not even sugary carbonated water seemed to budge her weight in either direction.

Sliding back into the seat next to her, I set her drink down before her and leaned in to put a peck against that spot on her neck she always told me never to kiss in public. "So, double date, huh?"

She squirmed against the wall and tilted her head to protect her neck from the gesture, "Sure. It got you out of your room for once, plus I figured it'd be fun, even if it's only dinner."

I grinned and nodded. "Well, cool. Don't get to see Erin much, anyhow."

"That's 'cause you never come over to our place, dork," Kris countered.

"I fear for my eternal soul every time I go over there," I whined. "There are ancient rituals involving lipstick and foundation; horrible bezoars sacrificed to the almighty hairbrush." I laughed when I felt the kick to my shin.

"Just because you two don't bother with anything more than a cursory comb through your nappy hair doesn't give you permission to dismiss us," Erin replied. Eric was trying to hide his laughter behind his soda.

"I just worry that I'll have to turn in my gay card, is all."

Kris rolled her eyes. "You've already got a big red mark on your permanent record for that, bucko."

"I suppose so." I grinned, "Though, hey, even my mom still thinks I just met a guy, not a girl."

Kris' smile faltered a little, and what remained looked as though it took a little effort for her to keep there. "You told her about me, but didn't say I was a girl."

Realizing my gaff, I backpedaled, "Well, I mean, it's complicated. I didn't tell her anything except that I was interested in someone but didn't want to talk about it." I added hopefully, "It's like... coming out, only backwards. Doesn't make it any easier..."

There were several moments of silence, and I sank glumly deeper into the booth. "Aaaand now everyone's staring at me."

We were distracted by our server setting food in front of us, each in turn. Thankfully, the conversation settled onto new and lighter topics, and Kris even seemed to lighten up to her normal, chipper self, comforting me with a hand on my thigh in the middle of the meal.

When the plates were cleared and we decided to walk back to campus in order to decide what to do next, Kris lagged behind, and so I did as well. "What's up?"

"Why do you like me, Cor?" she blurted, even before I was finished, and it was hard to tell if her ears were red from the cold or from the topic. "I mean..."

I'm sorry. That sounded angry and I'm not, really. I just sometimes worry that you like me 'cause I seem like a guy or something."

I laughed quietly and slipped my arm around her shoulders at the crosswalk, holding her there as the red hand bid us to, even though Erin and Eric had already crossed. "It's not that, I promise. I really can't say why I like you, and i'm not sure I want to define that. I always sound stupid when I try in my head."

Kris jabbed me with her elbow, keeping her hands warmly ensconced in her pockets. "Getting me to swoon and blush won't get you out fo this," she cautioned, adding, "Though it certainly gets you brownie points. I just... why didn't you tell your mom?"

I shrugged and gently guided her forward with my arm around her shoulders, getting her into the crosswalk before letting her go. Walking that close was awkward with the height difference, and my hand was getting cold. "It's weird. I guess," I faltered. "It feels like... all the trouble I went through coming out as gay to my parents... all that would be a lie if I suddenly told them that I wasn't. Know what I mean?"

Kris shrugged: an answer as good as 'no.' We walked on after Erin and Eric for a little ways before she spoke again. "People change all the time, Cor. Do you think your parents wouldn't like this sort of change?"

It was my turn to shrug. "I'm an only child. It was a bit of a big deal when I came out, because it meant I was the last of a line, in some ways. No grand children. I kind of feel bad for causing that sort of trouble. I guess it just seems like my parents view it as all one way or all the other. All straight or all gay. Just barging in with 'hey I've got a girlfriend!', well, it feels like I'd be coming out all over again, putting them through that trouble... again..." I trailed off awkwardly, realising I was rambling, that I had kept talking after I had already said what I wanted to say.

I watched Eric look back at me with a concerned look, but I smiled and gestured subtly to him. He and Erin walked on even as Kris and I walked slower, meandering along the sidewalk through the oval shaped plot of land at the heart of the old campus uninventively named The Oval.

"Well, I told my parents," Kris said after a while.

I leaned to put a kiss on top of her head, my nose warmed by her dense hair. "Braver than I."

She laughed and leaned against me, trying to guide me into the snow. "No, I just thought it was normal. I keep forgetting," she trailed off, relaxing against me a little. "I keep forgetting it's not, for you. Not really."

"Not yet," I corrected, dropping my hand down to seek her own.

* * *

The credits rolled on the film and Kris sagged heavily against me. She was in the process of educating me in film with some of her artsier DVDs. I wasn't quite sure what role alcohol played in the process, but when I mentioned that I had procured a bottle of gin through one of Thomas friends, she had insisted upon a movie night as if the two were inseparable.

So Friday night found us lounging on my bed with the pillows cushioning the wall we lounged against, drunkenly watching movies. She had eased me into the evening with something vaguely sci-fi, but the night turned quickly towards chick-flick with this last movie, though I did have to admit to enjoying the film quite a bit.

I stretched out and felt the pleasant fatigue that I noticed accompanied drinking, the slight warmth inside and the faint buzz in my head. I felt that I was still in the experimentation phase with alcohol and found that I had enjoyed being tipsy rather more than being drunk, and aimed for that this evening. Kris, on the other hand, while she had had the same amount as me, certainly seemed to be more heavily affected by the drink and was to the point of slurring her words.

“Mmf,” she stated, rubbing her face against my sleeve. “S’a cute movie.”

“I thought it was an art film.”

“Oh, sure. Mos’ art films are crap, though,” she mumbled, giggling. “I like that one more for how cute it is.”

I hugged my arm around her shoulders and pulled her up closer. “I liked it.”

“Good. Would hit you if you didn’t,” Kris replied muffledly.

“Violent, abusive relationship,” I murmured, slipping myself off the bed to let Kris settle down onto her side, head propped up with one of her hands. I poked at the TV once or twice before finding the power button, plunging the room into darkness. I grabbed the empty two liter bottle off my desk and bonked it against Kris’ head as best as I could while tipsy in the dark. “You, girl, need water. Don’t sleep yet.”

Taking the sigh as a reply, I made my way out into the corridor, proving how drunk I wasn’t by walking all the more carefully to the water fountain to fill the bottle.

The movie, *Amelie*, was just about perfect, I thought. It wasn’t that it described my own relationship with the girl in my room, but that the relationship in the film had described just about every emotion I’d felt in all of my relationships, ever.

“Fuck! Daydreaming,” I mumbled, pulling the bottle away from the fountain and shaking the water I’d spilled on my hands off onto the floor. I made my way back to the room with the mostly-full water bottle, taking a few rather large gulps myself so that I could dedicate the rest to rehydrating my girlfriend.

In my room, I found Kris sitting up on the bed with her tired eyes smiling at me, gratefully taking the water and drinking it carefully. I crawled up onto the bed and sat down near to her.

“Thanks, Cor.”

I nodded and sat silent for a bit, feeling a bit of a lump in my throat. The Friday before fall break. A week away. “Stay here tonight?”

Kris laughed and nodded. “Duh, not walking back across campus drunk.”

“Good,” I sighed, relaxing to lounge on my bed as before. Mom had planned out most of my next week, and although we were hopeful and had each other’s phone numbers, it didn’t look as though I’d make it down to Boulder from Steamboat.

Kris drank about half of the water before capping the bottle and setting it down by the side of the bed. She grabbed at a pillow and piled it up at the head of the bed, flumping down tiredly on her back. I stretched out on my side next to her and rested my hand on her belly, that subtle roundness I had noticed when we first met always seemed to fit perfectly against my palm. I had even subtly dissuaded her from trying to lose weight because of it, which made me feel selfish and giddy.

We shared a few tired kisses while the utter darkness of the room drove us toward sleep.

I had never slept well with anyone in the bed. Their slightest movement would wake me and even a little bit of sound kept me awake. It was hard enough even with Thomas on the other side of the room, and it was no different with Kris in the same bed as me. I drifted in and out of sleep in the rhythm of her movements, fragments of dream mixing with reality so that I was never quite sure which was which even as we dozed under the covers, still fully clothed.

I dreamt that I was a balloon or some sort of gaseous, expansive creature. Floating, but held down to earth by the blankets, held in check by clothing covering almost all of me. My emotions were expansive, and I felt as though there was a need to get in contact with a similar sort of creature that was oh-so-close. My pensive feelings about being away from Kris seemed to translate into this physical yearning to merge with her even as we slept.

I floated closer to reality and further from the dream as I felt her shift against me. I heard someone's breath catch but wasn't sure whose as our arms tightened around each other almost simultaneously. The transition from sleep to wakefulness was seamless, a glide through a spectrum of blues to black, and even before I was completely there, her lips found mine and we settled into a kiss. She slid her knee between my own to wedge my thighs apart with her own, and I slid my fingers up beneath the hem of her shirt to brush my hand over smooth skin and press her closer from the small of her back.

More awake than asleep now, I heard her moan quietly into my mouth and we pressed ourselves closer still. My head was still full of the buzzing from the gin and it seemed to not leave any room for concern as I felt my erection pressed firmly to her hip. She broke the kiss and we stayed silent — it felt as though there was some sort of communication between our subconscious thoughts.

What followed seemed to be choreographed by those same thoughts. The urgency picked up and I brushed my hand up along her back, helping Kris slide out of her shirt even as she reached her hand around to undo her bra. My shirt followed and, topless, we resumed the kiss with a new fervor.

A few awkward moments followed as both of our hands went to work at helping the other out of their pants without breaking kiss if at all possible. I leaned myself in against her front as I felt myself so close to that dream of merging, my arm fast around her back to hold her close against me. Still in our underwear, my arousal had tented out my boxers and was sandwiched between us, every movement from either person translated into electric pleasure.

I felt her nails as she pushed her fingers down over my back and slid them beneath the waistband of my underwear, grazing over my backside and pushing

the garmen down a little ways. With my consciousness starting to invade my thoughts, I pulled back from the kiss and whispered, “Kris, we—”

She shook her head and cut me off by reinitiating the kiss, tugging at my lower lip with her own. I paused for a moment and she took the opportunity to take the lead, sliding my boxers down over my hips. I raised myself up off the mattress a little to let her do so and shivered at the sudden exposure that lead to. It took me a second, but I followed her example, hooking my thumb through the waistband of her panties and sliding them down her thighs.

She was the next to break the kiss as she pulled me to her fingers guiding me towards her even as she freed a leg from her underwear and used her foot to push my boxers down around my ankles. “It’s okay, Cor,” she gasped. Then, “Please...” She pulled me in against her and rolled partway onto her back, the motion completing our union as I slid against her, bringing us together completely.

A corner of my mind was all that was left to observe the rest. Sex with girls wasn’t that different than sex with guys, it thought. No, it recanted, it was totally different. Then even that shut down and all that was left was movement, slow and attentive. The alcohol had dulled our nerves and consequently, the experience was drawn out until, our motions growing ever more frantic, bright lights popped in the back of my skull as my orgasm washed over me, Kris shuddering and breathing hoarsely against me.

We melted against each other and stayed united for as long as possible before, sleepily, we separated and each pulled our underwear back on, each cleaning up a bit in the process. We returned to the embrace and buried ourselves under the covers, sharing feathery kisses and whispering to each other as we held close.

“We weren’t... safe,” I realized aloud, calm despite the implications.

“I’m on the pill,” Kris replied sleepily. “And you’re not sick, are you?”

I shook my head a little and bumped my nose against hers. “You might get the gay, though.”

I felt her smile as she kissed at me, “I think I might’ve given you the straight, Cor.”

Comfortable together like that, sleep surprised me — I didn’t wake until morning.

Transition and modulation

My computer had been packed into a Corona box given to me by Thomas — all except the monitor — and my clothes were packed back into my laundry basket with my trumpet laying packed within the clothing, still inside its case. All of this had been lugged outside to the picnic table near the road at the first call from my mom and I waited with it as she tried to find her way through campus back to my dorm.

Kris and I had dressed bashfully that morning, doing most of it under the covers still as we giggled childishly to each other. Despite the both of us being beet red, there were no feelings of guilt I had come to expect from the First Time. Instead we had gone back to our normal selves, sharing a breakfast in the dining hall and talking as we always had, except perhaps with more smiling.

We had an extended goodbye in the lobby of my hall, promising to call or talk online whenever we could during the break. I felt as though the forced absence meant a bit more to me than it did to Kris, who seemed to just take it in stride, but I kept that to myself. I figured it was an artifact from my previous relationships where time together meant much more.

I saw my mom's blue hatchback turn the corner toward me and slid myself off the picnic table to motion her towards the driveway that ran up to the south doors of my dorm. It was a twenty minute loading zone, but I had my stuff packed into her car in less than twenty seconds, piling into the passenger seat and leaning over to give my mom a hug.

"Hey!" She hugged back fiercely, "Good to see you again!"

I settled back into my seat as she backed out of the short lane. "Good to see you too. How're things going?" I asked.

She shrugged, "Oh, you know, good now that I got my son back."

"Yeah, gonna be a good break."

"Mm. Want to stop for lunch on our way out of town?"

I nodded, giving her directions to get off campus and head toward the noodle restaurant Kris, Erin, Eric and I had gone to on that first double date. My mind raced in the meantime, coming up with possible scenarios, ways to tell my mom about Kris, and discarding them each as quickly as they arose.

We pulled up beside the restaurant just as someone else was pulling away, parking feet from the door. I levered myself from the car and moved to hold the door to the restaurant for my mom, following her in.

We spent a few moments in line, catching up on this and that — the weather differences between here and home, how the dogs were doing, the break ahead. It wasn't until we'd placed our order and found a booth that we started talking about anything of import.

Of course, my mom jumped in right away, "So, tell me about this guy you mentioned."

I hesitated for a moment brushed my hair from my forehead. Thoughts such as getting a haircut seemed to be trying to push themselves into line for me to say, but I managed to jump ahead of them with, "Well... um, actually, it's a girl."

My mom's eyes went wide and she sat up straighter in the booth, smiling at me. "Really! Well, now you really have to tell me about hi- her."

Sinking down into the booth a little, I shrugged, "I dunno, it just kind of happened, I guess. I met her in my composition class. Her name's Kris."

A flicker of recognition crossed my mom's face before transforming into a furrow of her brow. "Kris? Like short for Christina? Or Kristen?"

I smiled faintly, "Kristal, though I'm not supposed to ever call her that."

"Well," my mom laughed. "You certainly do keep us on our toes. This is a bit of a surprise, for just a few months away from home."

I nodded. "Is it... I mean, are you okay with this?"

My mom's expression softened. "Of course I am, Cory. Hell, I bet most parents of gay kids would be just thrilled to find out that their child was suddenly in a heterosexual relationship."

We sat back a bit to make room for the server as she set our plates in front of us. Thanking her and each taking a few bites of food.

"It is different," I said after a bit.

My mom nodded, "I bet. You've never really shown any interest in girls before this, so it's a little surprising."

"But okay?"

She laughed, "I already said it was okay. I worry for you a little, but it's certainly okay."

"Worry?" I finished chewing, then continued, "Why?"

"Well, a couple reasons, I suppose." She sat back against the booth and fiddled with her napkin in her lap as if organizing her thoughts. "First of all, isn't it a little soon for a relationship? You had to have just met her."

I nodded, unable to think of a reply.

"And it seems, I don't know, reactionary or something. Like you moved away, and got into a relationship with a girl just to make your life that much more different than it could've been." She thought about that for a moment as she finished off her lunch. "It's not bad, and maybe it'll last for a while." She winced at the choice of words and rushed to add, "With so much working against it, I mean."

I hunched over my half-finished plate of stroganoff and toyed with the noodles and mushrooms. I struggled with my thoughts for a minute or two. Part of me saw that what she was saying was all true; another part was disgusted with the way she had said it; and the hopeless romantic side was rushing to defend the way I felt. "It's funny," I mumbled. "I thought this would be like coming out all over again."

My mom smiled.

"You're right, though." I continued, "It does have a lot working against it, but I dunno, I feel so good where I am, it's hard to look past that to see problems with the relationship."

"Well, it's certainly alright, and I'm happy for you, I really am," my mom patted my hand. "Just... you know I worry about you a lot. Just telling you those worries."

I nodded and ate a little more of my food, though the sobering talk had left me with little appetite. I left the last few bites on the plate and we made our way back out to the car instead. I was suddenly anxious about heading home, wanting to just stay on campus instead, all the places I associated with Kris.

I waited until we were in the car and at the stop light before I voiced a new concern. “How do you think my dad will take it? Or Jared for that matter.”

A pained look crossed my mom’s face, but she hid it as she turned into a gap in traffic. “Well, you know Jared,” she said quietly. “He’ll probably be pretty pleased by it. As for your dad... I don’t know. I don’t think he’ll have a problem with it, though. Just don’t know how he’ll react.”

A small flare of anger pulsed in my chest at the thought of Jared. Near the end of summer, my mom had all but said to me that she loved everything about that man except the way he had reacted to me. With their marriage coming right at the beginning of my senior year of high school, I couldn’t help but feel as though part of the reason he had decided to delay in proposing to my mom until then had been because I was due to be out of the picture so soon after the fact.

The anger pulsed weakly in my chest before failing, buried under the pensive weight of my thoughts. I watched Fort Collins roll flatly by, diminishing from the tree-filled, slightly backwards town I had grown to enjoy into a dirty landscape of warehouses until we found ourselves on I-25, even the warehouses dying off to leave nothing but a flat expanse of grass.

* * *

I climbed out of bed after an hour of trying to sleep and sat on the floor in front of my computer, watching the screen dully as it lit the room with streaming characters, the boot sequence scrolling by haltingly. The grayish glow it cast around the room left only a rectangular shadow from my bed against the wall, my room almost completely empty other than that, a few boxes stacked in one of the corners contained most of the rest of my stuff.

The stream of characters blinked to nothing before being replaced by a gray screen, and then a blue one, prompting me to log in. I typed in my username one-handed — CoryroC — and then the string of letters, numbers, and punctuation that served as my password, watching the system load the rest of the way.

I stared at the fractal pattern of my desktop for a few moments longer before finally moving, dragging the mouse cursor up to the top of the screen to select the wireless network to connect to, the one I had set up nearly two years ago for Jared. I barely waited for the network manager to finish authenticating before opening up my browser and, on a whim, my IM client. I told myself that I was hoping that a few friends from high school would be on, that I wasn’t really hoping against all logic that Kris would be on at midnight.

Rather than watching the names pile up in the contacts window, I switched immediately to my browser to check email and forums, figuring that maybe if I didn’t look at the buddy list, I wouldn’t be disappointed.

My email had hardly loaded before the window was partially obscured by a message.

krisTALsaidso: no sleep?

I tried to keep my heart from squeezing out from between my ribs as I typed back.

CoryroC: No. You?

krisTALsaidso: just got home from a movie with the folks

CoryroC: Cool, cool. How are things going down in Boulder?

krisTALsaidso: alright so far

krisTALsaidso: how bout up in the mountains?

CoryroC: Cold and boring :P

krisTALsaidso: aw poor boy. having fun with the family at least?

CoryroC: Nah, they're the boring part :P I told my mom and step dad about us, though.

krisTALsaidso: howd that go?

CoryroC: My mom was fine with it, though she said she was worried that I got into the relationship too fast, and that I was trying to make my life extra different by moving away and dating a girl.

krisTALsaidso: weird.. do you think you rushed into this?

CoryroC: Yeah, but that's why it's so fun :)

krisTALsaidso: god your such a dork. what about your stepdad?

CoryroC: He was happy.

krisTALsaidso: cool

CoryroC: I guess. I feel a little offended because he was only happy that I wasn't going out with boys anymore. He's kind of a dick like that.

krisTALsaidso: that sucks

krisTALsaidso: like he wasnt happy for you just happy at your expense

CoryroC: Yeah. He told me he was glad that he could finally relate to me now, and asked all these questions about you.

krisTALsaidso: ew like what kind?

CoryroC: Just like how you looked and why I liked you and if you were hot or not.

krisTALsaidso: how did you answer?

krisTALsaidso: answer carefully ;)

CoryroC: Hehe. I said you were short and had short hair.

krisTALsaidso: dick

CoryroC: Heh. I said I liked you because you're funny and sweet and more honest than anyone. And I said you were hot :)

krisTALsaidso: good boy

CoryroC: Thanks :P It's really weird having this random old man asking me about you, whether you're hot or not.

krisTALsaidso: i know, gross

krisTALsaidso: what are you doing for thanksgiving?

CoryroC: I'm supposed to drive to my dad's and have it down there with him and his girlfriend in the Springs.

krisTALsaidso: aw :(i was going to ask if you wanted to come to boulder

CoryroC: Aw :(That would be nice. Though I'm driving back up from the Springs straight to school, I could come see you then. :)

krisTALsaidso: really? could you give me a ride to school then?

CoryroC: Of course :)

krisTALsaidso: yay ill let my parents know

CoryroC: Cool :) Maybe you can show me some of Boulder when I pick you up

krisTALsaidso: yepyp it's a cool place

krisTALsaidso: i need to go to bed cor :(

CoryroC: :(:(:(:(

krisTALsaidso: im soooooorry. i need to

CoryroC: I suppose I can let you go ;) Sleep well. I'll talk to you later.

krisTALsaidso: thanks hun. you sleep soon too. **MWAH**

CoryroC: Hehe, mwah.

krisTALsaidso: :)

krisTALsaidso: bye :)

I read through the conversation again once the icon on the window turned from green to grey before closing the window, closing my email without reading any of it, and telling the computer to suspend. I climbed back into bed once the screen went dark and stretched out on my back. I'm sure I fell asleep still smiling.

The next morning, I felt just as good as last night had made me feel, and so the drive down south to visit my dad didn't seem to be that big of a deal as I packed up everything I needed for school once more in my car and said goodbye to my mom and Jared. My mom kept telling me to have fun and be safe, and Jared just kept grinning at me in a way that made me want to slap him.

"How's it goin', jerk?" I asked my car as I settled into the seat again for the first time in nearly six months. I spent a minute or two making sure everything was adjusted to my preferences before starting the little sedan up and setting it into reverse, letting off the brake and just touching the gas to get the car smoothly up over the hill of our driveway and onto the street again, grateful that I could once again describe anything my car did with the word 'smoothly'.

Once I wound through the southern edge of town and got back onto the highway headed up the pass, I settled back into the rhythm of driving once again, sipping at my coffee and lifting a CD out of the center console to slip into the player. I let Bernstein lift me up over the pass, easing my way along with traffic carefully and relaxing at the sight of real snow piled all around me, not the thin, anemic stuff that Fort Collins called snow.

Once I was over the pass, the drive became easier and afforded me plenty of time to think, considering I still had a few hours to go until I reached my dad's. I struggled to digest the recent abrupt change in my life and more easily put it into words.

Kris had walked into my life with an ease that belied how much she had come to mean to me. My attraction to her, to her height, to the way she did her hair and the clothes she wore, her belly and her hips, and even her breasts;

to her personality and her laugh and the way she always called me ‘boy’ or ‘Cor’, somehow morphing my name into ‘heart’ in other languages. It seemed obvious to me why I had fallen for her, until I took her gender into account, and I was confronted with the fact that, for all of my life as long as I could remember, I had never been attracted to girls at all.

Pacing myself with traffic and watching the road with half my attention, I set the other half to try to define what it was that I liked about guys that I didn’t like about girls. There were, of course, the obvious physical differences — I could hardly deny the fact that most girls simply weren’t attractive to me. I chalked up stereotype after stereotype under the female column and countered each with a stereotype about guys before scrapping that project.

Maybe it was just Kris? I tried to define what was different about her that didn’t seem to fit in with my previous definition of Girl. She certainly did seem more easy-going than most of the girls I had been friends with, and she did seem surprisingly unself-conscious, a trait I had found distinctly lacking in many of the girls at my school. Thinking back on it, though, the same trait reared its ugly head in guys, and had been a large part of why I had focused less of my attention on the guys at school and more on those I met on the internet.

I did my best to skirt the possibility that my mom had mentioned, that I was just going out with Kris because I was trying so hard for something different than what I had in high school. I felt that I couldn’t be that shallow, and more than that, I wanted to give Kris the benefit of the doubt. Clearly there was something about her that had caused me to let her into my life and to get as close with her as I did.

My thoughts were derailed as my mind wandered from trying to define Kris to trying to picture her, which led to the inevitable thoughts about the night before break. I shifted slightly in my seat and winced, kneading the heel of my palm down against the crotch of my pants as if to stifle the erection that had resulted from such thoughts. I settled for rearranging the uncomfortable situation in order to continue thinking about it.

The sex had been perhaps the most surprising part of it all. Where I normally was so nervous around guys that I could hardly perform, that night had gone startlingly smoothly in my opinion. It took me a few minutes to remember the fact that both Kris and I had been a little drunk, which certainly must’ve helped with my nerves. I struggled with the conflicting feelings of the experience going counter to everything that I had previously desired and all that I had enjoyed about that one night a few days ago.

Sex, it occurred to me, was just sex, no matter with whom. I suppose I could’ve enjoyed sex with just about anyone, so long as the desire was there, so that wasn’t part of the problem. Of course, that just brought me back to pondering the source of my desire for Kris, which really boiled down to the question I’d been asking myself for nearly eight years now: why did I generally prefer guys in the first place?

I shrugged off this dead-end and slipped in a different CD once the Bernstein finished, going back to remembering about that night instead, and thinking of how good it would be to see my girlfriend — girlfriend! — again.

* * *

Thanksgiving had come and gone without any flair. Dad had spent his inventiveness with the holiday early on and, a few years ago, cooked turkey once a week for about a month and a half in order to find the best and simplest recipe, rather than every year trying something different. I suppose it was his attempt at working toward tradition. He had tried to make deep-frying the turkey the tradition, but on only the second year, he had splashed the oil on himself and burned his hand badly enough to put that project permanently on hold.

Now that Saturday had come around, though, I sat at the breakfast bar near the kitchen in his apartment, watching him putter around the kitchen, a series of disposable tupperware containers set out along the counter. He carefully filled each with a serving of mashed potatoes and gravy, slices of turkey breast, and green beans.

“There,” he announced, snapping the lid on the last of the containers. “Five of ’em should keep you going for... what, a day and a half, at the rate you eat?”

I laughed and nodded, slipping off the stool to grab the two dollar styrofoam cooler we had picked up at the grocery store the day before, setting it on the counter so that he could empty the five pound bag of ice we had also picked up into the bottom. He stacked the rectangular meals above that. He hesitated for a moment before unpacking the containers again and reaching into the fridge to grab four bottles of the inexpensive beer he drank and lay those on the ice before repacking the meals on top of them.

“You be way fucking careful bringing this into your room.” He shot me a sly grin, “Though from the sounds of it, your roommate is teaching you how to party already.”

I laughed and nodded, “Thomas is a pro, that’s for sure. Thanks, dad.”

He nodded and rummaged around the junk drawer for a moment before procuring a roll of clear packing tape, taping the lid onto the styrofoam cooler. “This tape is not to come off until you get into your room and right next to the fridge. If you get a ticket for drunk driving, I’m disowning you.”

I nodded, “Of course. Driving drunk scares me almost as much you.”

“Brat,” he said, throwing the tape at me and grinning.

“Yeah, that’s me, I guess.” I got up to put the tape back in the drawer.

“Now two of those are Kris’s, you hear?” He whacked me between the shoulder blades, “And some of that food, too. Girlfriends are work, and they take bribing to keep them happy. It’s a big responsibility.”

“Damn straight!” Jennifer, my dad’s girlfriend, hollered from the living room.

Dad favored me with a commiserating look and I laughed. “Thanks again, dad. Gotta get going here, though. Picking Kris up on my way to school.”

“Alright, Cory. You drive safe, yeah? And call us once in a while. We like hearing from you, despite what you may think.”

I leaned in and gave him hug with one arm while shaking his hand with the other, “Will do. Talk to you soon.” Jenny had appeared at the doorway to the

kitchen, so I gave her a quick hug as well, "See you both around."

They nodded and said their goodbyes as I grabbed the cooler, making my way out the door and down the flight of stairs to the parking lot. The cooler made its way into the back seat in the footwell by my laundry basket.

Once I made my way back onto I-25, I headed north.

My dad's reaction had been the most surprising of all. He somehow managed to find the perfect balance between the non-reaction that had bothered me about coming out and the concern that my mother had shown. He told me that he loved me no matter what and, despite the cliché, it really did sound genuine. He sat me down with a beer and sat across from me with his own as I talked. It was awkward at first, but the fact that he seemed genuinely interested and actively listening soon got me to open up about my own concerns about the relationship. He agreed with my mom's prognosis about getting into the relationship too quickly, but said that it wasn't a problem if we were both willing to work at it.

"I don't think you're trying to be too different too soon," he had said, shaking his head and leaning back in his chair, cradling his beer to his chest. "I just don't think that's like you. Really. To be honest, I was worried that you would drop into some of your old habits from early on in high school when you moved to college. I was worried you'd focus just on your trumpet and not on your school or personal life. It's good to hear that you're building a new life up there, and hey, it's good to hear that you're taking advantage of all new surroundings to even experiment a little. This Kris sounds nice, and I want to meet her sometime, since it sounds like you two really do well together."

I replayed more of the conversation in my head as I drove up towards Denver.

"What should I do if it doesn't work out, though?" I had asked. "Girls seem so much more emotional than guys, so I don't want to start some big fight or make her freak out."

He had laughed at me for that one, "You seem to be ignoring the first Chris you went out with. Christopher. The angry phone calls? Him threatening to kill himself? You walking around always on the verge of crying?"

"Well, yeah," I laughed too, then. "That's true. That was a whole big mess."

"I think you'll be fine, to answer your question. You seem to have found a real gem. One of those girls who doesn't seem burdened by her gender. She's just a person, not a girl. And I think she found a good boyfriend, too," he said, canting his beer towards me in a toast. "You're just a person, too, not a guy. Just be careful this situation doesn't turn you into a guy. You make a much better person."

I had nodded along with him then, but now as I thought back, I think I was a lot closer to understanding how I had gotten myself into this wonderful mess.

I thought about it until I found myself on the outskirts of Boulder, setting the directions Kris had given me against the steering wheel and winding my way west, toward the base of the mountains. The town was beautiful, and I had a hard time taking it in while driving and following directions at the same time. It felt like a perfect mixture home and Fort Collins, with the mountains and the mild weather both, not to mention the beautiful planes of ruddy rock

jutting up just west of the town, providing a comfortable backdrop for the city that promised to be amazing during sunrises.

I found myself in front of Kris' house sooner than I had expected and parked the car along the street in front of it, sitting for a second before digging in my pocket for my phone. I was startled with my cell halfway out of my pocket by a knocking on my window, looking over to a positively beaming girl standing next to my car.

"Hey! Get out here and meet the parents!" she shouted, gesturing vaguely back to her house.

I laughed and unbuckled my seatbelt, slipping out of the car and trying to swallow the lump that had formed in my throat when she had mentioned parents. I surreptitiously checked my hair and shave, straightening my shirt as I walked around the car and followed her up the lawn to the front door where her father was standing. He was wearing a red hoodie and khakis, and I could tell that he was likely the source for that little bit of weight Kris had on her; he seemed almost larger than life.

"James Careen," he offered, sticking out a meaty hand for me to shake. "You must be Cory."

Startled by his solemnity, I shook his hand as firmly as I could manage without shaking, nodding.

Kris reached around me to punch her father in the shoulder, "Daddy! Cut it out."

James Careen bellowed his laughter and reached his free arm around to slap me on the shoulder, pulling me into a very manly sort of hug. "Relax, kid, you'll be fine. Damn, Kris, you picked a nervy one!"

"Don't give that poor boy a heart attack, Jim," a bright voice sounded from behind Kris' father. Opposites apparently do attract, I thought. Hardly taller than Kris herself, her mother seemed frail enough to be snapped by a slight breeze. She edged herself between her husband and me and leaned to give me a feather-light hug, smiling widely all the while. "I'm Kathy, dear. Kristal has told us an awful lot about you!"

"Mom," Kris whined through clenched teeth, leaning in against me as her mother let me free of the hug, slipping her hand into mine. "Making me feel like I'm in high school again."

"Oh, come on, girl," her father rumbled, grinning at the two of us. "Now that you've left us, for that flat, wicked place up north, we're allowed to dote at least a little bit."

I was herded into the house by Kris and her parents and stood just inside the door. Their house was painted a series of colors, each of which seemed to go with whichever room it belonged to: the dining room was painted a comfortably warm yellow to pick up the sunlight from the south-facing double french doors. Hard wood flooring extended from the living room to the dining room and, I assumed, down the hallway as well.

"You have a beautiful house," I commented to no one in particular.

"Thank you, dear," Kris' mom quipped, smiling as Kris set a laundry basket in my hands. Judging from its weight, it either contained several bowling balls,

or else the clothes were packed to be just as dense.

“We gotta get going, I think,” Kris said. “I want to take Cory to Pearl Street before it gets too dark, and we have to head up after that.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Kris’ dad was burdened with another laundry basket that seemed to be filled half with bedding and half with clothes, “Shall we load up, then?”

Kris nodded and led the parade of her belongings out of the house, burdened only with her backpack. The two laundry baskets wrangled for space in the trunk of my car, but eventually fit, leaving the passenger footwell for backpack storage. With the car loaded, we gathered back on the foreshortened front lawn of the ranch house so that Kris could say goodbye to her parents. Hugs were had and Kris’ father clapped me on the back again, saying, “Tell your boyfriend to relax.”

Kris rolled her eyes, “I will, dad.”

And with that, we were in the car again, pulling back out into the street and heading toward the road that would take us further into town.

“Sorry about my parents,” Kris sighed, slouching in the passenger seat. “They’re pretty weird.”

“They were nice, I thought. Never met anyone’s parents before. When I was in a relationship with them, I mean.”

“Really?” Kris laughed, pointing out the way towards downtown. “Why not? I’m not your first relationship, right?”

I grinned and shook my head, “No, just that I was always the one with the liberal parents willing to meet a boy’s boyfriend. The two or three boyfriends I had all had parents that weren’t too happy about the whole thing.”

Kris nodded a little and picked at her nails distractedly. “You’ll have to tell me about them sometime. I’m curious.”

“Uh... well, alright, so long as you tell me about your exes,” I shot back.

“Ex. Only one. Fair enough, though.” She stared out the window for a few seconds before seeming to perk up, “It’s good to see you again! Sorry, I was all wrapped up in thinking about parents.”

I laughed and nodded, patting at her thigh with my free hand.

We pulled into a parking space in what seemed to be the middle of a neighborhood, which Kris assured me was close enough to our destination. Sure enough, a block north of where we parked, we walked out onto a brick-paved lane. Brownstone style storefronts lined the street as pedestrians, bundled against the chill of November, wandered between planters, each covered with a thin rime of snow.

“It’s kind of like Old Town up by campus, except cleaner, and with no cars.”

I nodded and looked around before following Kris as she started to wander along with the pedestrian traffic, “It’s pretty awesome. There’s a place sort of like it up in Steamboat, too.”

Kris bumped against me as she slid her arm through mine, hand holding onto my elbow loosely. “Tell me about your break. We didn’t talk enough while you were gone.”

“It really was pretty boring,” I shrugged, marvelling at the fact that I had never escorted anyone like this before. “My step-sister came home and spent most of the break whining. It was good, though, because it kept my step-dad out of my hair for the most part. Went on some walks with my mom and her dogs. Spent a bit of time talking about, you know, us.”

She smiled and gave my arm a squeeze in her hand. “Yeah? How’d everyone take it? Other than your step-dad, I mean.”

“Well, I think I told you about my mom. She’s happy for us and all, but still thinks that me going for a girl right after moving out is just some sort of reaction thing. I spent more time trying to convince her that I really do like you than I wanted to.”

Kris nodded and guided me as we walked along Pearl Street, walking us between planters, along storefronts, and around sculptures. “And your dad?” she asked, pulling me toward a shop that seemed to specialize in Tibetan and Indian imports. There was a dearth of those all over Colorado.

“He was way cool with it, actually.” I blushed a little as I added, “He made a bit of a scene about the fact that he might have grand children. I guess I was going to be the last of the line if I didn’t have kids.”

“Weird,” Kris laughed, shaking her head and pulling me into the shop, making a bee-line for a shelf full of brass and what appeared to be glass bowls. “I hope you aren’t planning on that yet, sir. I’d like to go ahead and enjoy life for a few more years before I spoil it with children.”

I grinned and nodded, watching as she picked up a suede-covered mallet and a brass bowl. She struck the side of the bowl with the suede end of the mallet and got a multi-tone ring out of it before flipping the mallet around and drawing it around the rim of the bowl, always keeping contact with the metal. After a few turns around the bowl I began to notice that one of the tones produced from the strike wasn’t fading like the rest. Instead, it got louder and louder until a piercing tone was flowing steadily from the bowl. The tone crescendoed until the bowl was vibrating so much that it caused the handle of the mallet to bounce against the bowl and bring out the other tones.

“Holy crap!” I exclaimed. “That’s awesome! What is that?”

“Singing bowl,” Kris said proudly, as if she had invented the concept. She quickly set the bowl back down and moved to stand in front of one of the crystal or glass bowls. These were much larger, probably a foot and a half in diameter and about as tall.

“Whoa, are those singing bowls, too?”

To answer me, she grabbed the mallet with both hands and drew it around the rim of the bowl, using the felt-lined end of it this time. It took a few seconds, but a low hum rose from the bowl. The hum grew and grew in volume until I had to step back from the bowl it was so loud. Kris grinned at me, then adopted a sheepish look, quickly setting the mallet back down on the shelf. I turned around to find the whole store staring at us.

We left quickly, laughing amongst ourselves. “I used to do that every time I came down here, so I had to do it now while I was visiting.”

Slipping my arm around her shoulders, I smiled at the thought of a girl visiting once a month for years, older every time, just to play the little singing bowls. "Cute," was my verdict.

She elbowed me in the side and grinned up to me.

"Anyway," I said, picking at the thread of our previous conversation. "Did you tell your parents you're dating a gay guy?"

Walking with me toward the end of the street mall, she nodded. "Yeah, they were kind of interested in it. My dad's a psychologist, and made me promise that I wasn't trying to convert you or anything. He's not a big fan of the whole ex-gay movement."

"Well, neither am I."

"Me either," Kris laughed. "I told him it was more like you figuring out you were bi instead of just gay."

"True enough, I suppose. I mean, I don't really know what it is, why I got in a relationship with you, I just like you."

"You're a dork," Kris explained, and I noticed that it wasn't likely just the cold that was making her ears so red.

"Can't help it, sorry," I grinned. "What about your mom?"

"She was cool with it, I suppose. My first relationship didn't end very well, so she's all protective of me. She was worried, sort of like your mom. Almost about the same thing, even, that you were just experimenting and would wind up hurting me."

"Well, that's not, like, my goal or anything. I—"

"Shh," she interrupted, giggling. "I know you're not aiming to hurt me. Mom just wants me to guard myself so I don't get hurt bad if things don't work out. She also told me not to tell you that, by the way..."

"I understand, I guess." I shrugged, "I don't want to hurt you, and I don't plan on it. What do you think you'd do if things don't work out, though?"

"Probably feel hurt. I'd kick you in the shins, too, so that you'd feel hurt, too."

I laughed, "Fair enough! I just don't want it to, like, destroy your life if this relationship ends, though."

She smirked and leaned in against me, "That won't happen. I'm not that fragile. And even if I was, do you think I'd tell you."

"Well, I'd hope so."

She shook her head. "No, because then you'd try to stay with me even if you didn't want to, just so you wouldn't do that. I think that would hurt the most."

I shook my head and tugged her against me, "Well, whatever. Lets talk about something else."

Kris laughed and stuck her tongue out at me. "Come on, lets check out the book store, then we can head back up to school."

Second theme in the dominant

Kris fell asleep about halfway between Boulder and Fort Collins, so I took her straight to her dorm, helped her unpack, and saw her to bed. She said that she hadn't been sleeping well at her parents since all they had left of her room was a mattress on the floor and all of the rest of her stuff in boxes in closets. I kissed her a few times and made sure she went to lay down before slipping out of her dorm and back to my car.

Unloading my own stuff took only two trips, with the cooler of food and beer stacked on top of my laundry. Paranoid about the alcohol, those were the first things into my room, and the first thing I did when I got there was to rip the tape off the styrofoam of the cooler and immediately secret the beers inside the fridge. I stacked the food in front of it just in case anyone came looking, though Thomas was the only person likely to do so, and he was more of a vodka man.

My computer came in the second load of stuff, and I propped my door open with my trumpet case as I went about setting the tower back up, letting those who were still around know that I was here. I was eager to see all of my friends once more.

My ploy worked, because I had only just turned my computer on again for the first time when I looked up at a knock on my door. "Jamen! Hey man, what's up?"

Jamen smiled to me and languidly made his way over to my bed, sitting on the edge of it. He looked as though he was coming down from being a bit stoned. "Nammuch, Cory. Just got back a few hours ago. Good to be free again."

I chuckled, "Yeah, seems like you've been enjoying yourself."

His grin widened and he leaned back onto his palms. "What can I say? It's better up here."

"Here from where? Where's home for you?" I shook my head and set up music for us to listen to, "Can't believe I still don't know where you're from."

"Way down in Alamosa." He leaned himself back on my bed and crossed his arms behind his head. He had kept his hair cut to about an inch and a half for most of the semester, but it had started to grow out recently, and he rubbed his hand through it now. "Down by New Mexico."

"Wow, yeah, south even of me, in the Springs."

"Uh? I thought you were in the mountains?"

"Divorced parents, dad's in the Springs."

He nodded and stayed silent for a while, eyes half open and roving over the ceiling. I leaned back in my chair and relaxed with the music, more of that jazzy, downtempo Japanese stuff that Kris had given me. After a while, I started up my IM client and IRC, figuring Jamen was content to zone out on my bed for a while.

"Hey Cory," Jamen said, sitting up partway and startling me from what I was doing. "You're gay, aren't you?"

My face reddened through no will of my own, but I nodded. "Yeah, I am."

Jamen's brow furrowed and he looked at me searchingly. "Then what's up with you going out with Kris."

"I dunno," I shrugged and smiled. "Been working on that problem all week."

My friend shook his head in frustration, "What problem, though?"

"Whoa, man," I said, holding up my hands. "I just meant going out with Kris. It wasn't exactly an expected turn of events, you know."

Jamen was sitting up, now. Or, rather, slouching forward instead of back, his elbows propped on his knees and fists propping his head up in turn. "Well, alright..." he grumbled.

"Look, Jamen, what's going on, here? I'm a little confused..."

"I don't know, man," he said, then faltered a little bit. "I just... I'm wondering why you're going out with a girl if you're gay."

I sighed and leaned back against the chair's back a little more heavily, rocking back in it. "I don't really know, myself. I mean, I wasn't aiming to, and it's really weird now that I am, but I guess I sort of like it," I replied, images of Kris and I the Friday before flashed through my mind.

"But you're not trying to... er, change, are you? You're not trying to turn straight?"

I blinked at this and smiled, shaking my head. "Nah, just trying to stay happy."

Jamen sat up straight and rubbed his hands against his thighs as if to dry sweaty palms. "Good."

I threw a crumpled receipt at him and laughed. "What the hell's up with you, Jamen?"

Batting at the receipt, he smiled weakly at me. "Nothing, I guess. Just... those ex-gay people are freaks, I thought you'd gotten mixed up with them."

I must've recoiled at the thought, because Jamen chuckled a bit at me. I shook my head and replied, "No. You're right, they're pretty messed up. I just kind of fell for a girl, is all. I'm not sure why. Everyone's concerned about it and keeps asking me, but I don't have any answers."

Jamen tilted his head inquisitively.

"Like my mom and such," I elaborated. "And Kris's dad, for that matter. They each had some weird opinions and were worried about us."

He nodded.

"I'm not trying to change, I promise," I said, feeling a pang of affection for my friend, who seemed genuinely concerned about the whole thing. "Look, let's have a beer, and we can talk about it some more."

Jamen chuckled breathily and nodded, so I pried myself from my chair to go over to the door and nudge my trumpet out of the way of the door with my heel before heading to the fridge. I rummaged behind the stacks of leftovers to pull two of the bottles from the back of the minibar fridge. Inexpensive Mexican stuff that my dad liked to drink. I opened them with my multitool before handing one to Jamen, who took it gratefully.

I lounged in my chair again and my friend shifted to sit cross-legged on my bed. "Sorry again for getting angry."

“Nah, it’s alright. It just kind of confused me. What got you so worked up about Exodus and them, the ex-gay people?”

Jamen shrugged a little and stared down at his beer, watching his own fingers as they picked at the label. I watched with growing concern as the seconds ticked by. When no response came I hesitantly asked, “Did you... did you go through them.”

Jamen’s face went stony; any emotion that had been there before was replaced with a blank mask, and nothing showed through. He took a long drink of his beer before shaking his head. “No.”

I relaxed a little in my seat, watching him still.

Another handful of seconds passed. Then, “Not me.”

“Who, then?” I asked quietly.

He took another long drink from the bottle before setting beer down on my desk, a quarter of the drink still left in the bottom. “Thanks for the beer, Cory,” he said levelly, walking out of my room and letting the door swing shut behind him.

* * *

The confusing swirl of dreams resolved itself into my alarm chirping at me from my desk. I reached a sleepy hand up above my to whack at it until I managed to hit the snooze button. I rested on my back for a few moments longer before rolling over to slap at the power strip on the floor until I found the switch, gratefully rocking it to the ‘on’ position.

My computer’s fan buzzed briefly to life at the sudden burst of power before the case reminded it that no one had yet hit the power button. More importantly, though, a vague hiss signified my coffee maker just starting to heat up. Everything was on the power strip, and before going to bed, I had loaded the coffee maker with grounds and water. I had turned my computer off, turned off the power strip, then turned on my coffee maker, despite no power going to the device. It was the closest thing I had to an automated system.

I dozed lightly for another few minutes until my alarm chirped at me once more, and this time, the smell of a freshly made pot of coffee was enough to get me to swing my legs over the edge of the bed and rummage around on my clock for the switch to turn the demanding alarm off.

I shifted my bulk over to my desk chair and fumbled with the container of powdered creamer that I had mixed sugar in with when I had purchased it, dumping a healthy portion into my travel mug, followed by a sloppy pour of coffee to fill the mug the rest of the way.

I freely admitted to being one of the world’s stupidest people in the mornings, so streamlining my coffee intake process was a very important deal.

I stared dully at my computer’s screen as I sipped the acrid but caffeinated drink, and all I could do was wonder how monitors showed the color black when they were a brownish shade of dark grey when the pixels were off. My thoughts climbed slowly through the strata of rational thought, lifting away from primal urges, into base emotions, then logical thought, and finally, after nearly twenty minutes, the more complex emotions.

Relief. It was Friday. The week following Thanksgiving was, I had been told, the last real week of school. I knew that next week would be what was called Dead Week or Hell Week, depending on who you asked. The week before finals. Relief sank into a mixture of fear and depression — fear for the upcoming exams and depression at the thought that the exams would be followed by a month at home.

I tried thinking about the week past instead, but was confronted by confusion and frustration at the memories. Trapped by negative emotions on either side, I gave up and swallowed the last of my coffee, slipping into my robe and the dollar pair of flip-flops I used as shower shoes. My towel and I made our way to the showers.

The bathroom was delightfully deserted now, at not-quite-six in the morning. The powerful spray of very hot water struck me in the back of the neck and woke me up the rest of the way in only a few seconds. I cursed quietly as I remembered that I had gotten up this early in order to try running again. Now that I was awake and in the shower, the idea just seemed absurd and stupid. There was a foot of snow outside, I would likely freeze, and I just plain didn't want to.

Instead, I stood in the shower for a while, letting the hot water keep me warm. Finally, I shampooed quickly and rinsed myself off, grabbing the towel from the stall door in order to dry myself off as best as I could in the cubicle before wrapping the towel around my waist and slipping back into my robe.

I headed back to my room to get dressed and pondered my options for the sudden burst of extra time I was now blessed with. I decided I would go get some breakfast, since the dining hall would likely just be opening, then head over to the library for a bit.

Full of eggs and clutching the morning's second cup of coffee safely ensconced in the travel mug, I half-jogged toward the looming bulk of the library from my dorm. I slipped in and stood in the spacious lobby for a few moments to warm up. A quick look at the clock told me I had about forty-five minutes until class started. Plenty of time.

I didn't come to the library to check out any books. I had only ever checked one out during my time at the school, and that was for a class. Instead, I just wanted to walk around inside. The sight of all the books, neatly ordered on the shelves and smelling of beautifully aged paper seemed to do plenty for me when it came to thinking.

I made my way downstairs to the fiction stacks and moveable shelves, walking slowly and holding my coffee cup close against my front. I passed shelf after shelf stacked full of words and meaning and let my mind wander.

Kris and Jamen were currently battling for center-stage in the theater of my thoughts. Jamen had efficiently avoided me for nearly a week by now, ever since we talked on Saturday. I would see him in the hall and he would look right through me, heading back to his room as soon as he could. I hadn't said more than a greeting to him since then; I hadn't had the chance to, what with him always ducking away like that.

It weighed heavily on me that for some reason, a person I had considered

my friend was doing his best to not speak with me or be around with me, and considering our conversation on Saturday, all signs pointed to that delightful mess as the reason for him avoiding me.

I ducked into an aisle between shelves and trailed my fingers along the smooth spines of the books there as I dwelled on Jamen. I had become obsessed, arguing with myself all week long about who he had been talking about during our conversation about aversion therapy organizations. Possibilities ranged from ‘he was lying, it must have been himself’ to ‘his boyfriend’ and ‘maybe a sibling?’ All those and several more seemed just as likely.

And Kris. We had spent all of Sunday together, and it had been decidedly wonderful. She had commiserated with me when I had talked about Jamen, and I had listened to her describe the rest of her vacation with her parents, filling in the details that I had missed during our talk in Boulder, learning more about the dynamics of her family. Just catching up with her as we walked around campus was enough to get me back into a positive mindset. Eventually making our way through the Oval, we held hands and talked until it started snowing. Since her dorm was closer, we made our way there instead of heading to mine as we usually did.

Finding myself in the corner of the stacks, I turned toward the movable shelves, walking slowly and thinking of that evening. Shivering, we had shed our jackets and brushed the snow out of our hair. We kicked our shoes off and climbed up to her bed to wrap ourselves up in her comforter, clinging to each other as warmth returned slowly, aided, of course, by shared affections of kisses and touches.

What started as a game of warming the frigid hands on the other’s skin soon made its way further to, in Kris’ case, warming the cold fingers beneath Cory’s waistband. I remembered the lump that had formed in my throat as she had teased at me for a minute or so with no result other than me getting more and more nervous.

I had tried, really. As much as one can try to respond to sexual advances, that is, but no such luck. The more I tried, the tenser I became, the more nervous I felt, and the more nothing happened. I suppose it really hadn’t been all that long, but it felt like forever before Kris pulled her hands from my pants once more and slid them around my sides instead.

“What’s wrong, Cor?” she had whispered.

I just shook my head and slid my arms around her more firmly, squeezing her to my front and rolling carefully onto my back to pull her up onto me. Her giggle at the maneuver made me smile. “Just feeling kinda nervous or something,” I managed after a few moments. I leaned up to kiss her before adding, “Just nerves, promise.”

She felt tense against my front as she returned the kiss. “Well, alright.” She relaxed to let her legs rest down on either side of my thighs, joking, “So long as it isn’t the fact that you’ve got a girl messing with your junk and not a guy.”

I laughed and shook my head, doing my best to slow my heart at the fear that that might’ve been the case. I let my own hands settle against the small of her back, fingertips pressing in against her to either side of her spine, rubbing

in slow circles while I was there. “Nah, that’s not it. Just nerves,” I repeated.

My ears were red even now, as I jabbed at the button on the edge of the stack, a faint hum rising as the shelves of books slid smoothly on their tracks, opening up the aisle of bound journals to let me in. I wanted to feel even more secluded than I already was.

The memory went on. Kris had relaxed some at the careful massage I had given her, hands wandering up over her back so that fingertips could knead here and there. All of my touches helped to push her closer and that, more than anything calmed me down; the feeling of her on my front and my heart rate slowed to a more normal level. She had made these little grunts of moans at the attention that made me laugh, which she had hit me, however feebly, for.

After a few minutes of that, she had shifted above me and brought her knees up so that she was kneeling to either side of my hips, straddling them. I had responded then (as I responded now, making me thankful for my parka and baggy jeans) and she picked up on that, for she moved against me, pressing herself in closer and smiling, her nose inches away from my own.

Ears flushed bright red, I shook my head and made my way towards a stair well. There was no sense in dwelling on the rest of the time we spent in her room now, considering I had fifteen minutes until class, and the music building was a fifteen minute walk away.

Despite the cliché, the chilly air did much to help turn my thoughts away from the baser portions of that afternoon. My brow furrowed as I walked quickly. The downside of not dwelling on the actual sex was that I wound up thinking about how nervous I had felt at first. I had felt the same way around guys, too, but not to the extent that I couldn’t even react to a sexual situation. The trouble, of course, being that my current situation made that a whole lot more meaningful than it might have been if it had been with a guy.

Doubts had clung to me all week long as I alternated between fantasizing about the second half of the afternoon in her room and dwelling on the first half. Even with all the time I spent thinking about it, I was still unable to dissect what I had felt in order to find the root cause of it. All that time, and I still didn’t know why I had reacted the way I did — or rather, not reacted in the way I wanted to.

I shook my head angrily and picked up the pace of my walk to the music building, reaching down on a whim and grabbing a handful of snow from where it was piled next to the side walk, squeezing it into a clump of ice until my fingers went numb. I dropped the ice and rubbed my hand over my face, feeling the cold tighten my skin further. Dwell on it any longer, I told myself, and you’ll make your fears into truth. Even if it’s not the case, I railed on in my head, you’ll make it about her gender, and you’ll never respond again.

My chest was filled with coals of determination and a longing to see Kris again, and I let that warm me the rest of the way to class.

That evening, Kris lay against my front, the only thing separating us being a thin sheen of perspiration.

My determination had carried me through the rest of the day. I forced myself to think about the more pleasurable half of the encounter the previous Sunday

rather every time I found my mind wandering back to what had gotten me so down for the week. Kris had been busy with projects for most of the week and I saw her little so we had planned on spending Friday night in my room again since Thomas would, as always be out. Now, as the day progressed, I refined those plans in my head. I needed proof that it had nothing to do with gender? Fine. Assuming Kris was up to it, I'd get my proof.

Kris, it turns out, was indeed up to it, so what began as canoodling while listening to music went further beyond that, and we had watched each other undress after Kris had remarked that we had never really seen each other naked. My nerves had started up at that point and I felt logic getting in the way of lust. As if she was reading my mind, though, Kris had distracted me, and now here we were, sprawled on my bed, still naked, with Kris relaxed on my front and the covers half over the both of us.

"You, boy," she said, breaking the silence. "You're all sorts of crazy."

"Mmhuh?" was all I could manage as I fought off the post-coital drowsiness

Kris laughed and lifted her head to put a kiss on my throat. "You're just weird. What brought this on, anyway?"

"Brought what on?" I laughed, slipping my arms around her waist.

"This, dork. The sex."

"I dunno, just been thinking a lot about Sunday," I replied. It was true enough.

"Well, cool, I guess." She stretched against me before rolling in my grasp, tugging me onto my side along with her. She twisted about until she was nestled back against my front. "It's certainly nice. Just crazy. We were all concerned about rushing, then bam! Three times in three weeks."

I laughed and kept her held against my front, "Yeah, I guess. Guess I'm a pretty standard guy, what with the thinking about sex all the time."

"I noticed," Kris shot back. "You had me worried for a bit there on Sunday, and even some today."

"I was worried, too, kinda."

"Yeah? I thought you were going to tell me it was all a mistake or something, you really were gay."

I held on a little more tightly and she hugged my arms to her front. "Yeah, I've been beating myself up over that all week," I blurted out. I rushed to finish before losing my nerve, "I don't know why I got all nervous, but almost convinced myself it was because I was gay."

I felt Kris tense up against me as she nodded. I kissed the back of her head and murmured into her hair, "But I think we proved that wrong."

Kris nodded again and squeezed at my arms in her hands. "I didn't know you were thinking about it all week," she replied quietly. "You should've told me."

"Oh... I'm sorry. I didn't want to... I dunno, scare you or anything by bringing it up."

"But I want you to talk about it, Cor," she mumbled. "If you don't talk about it, then I dwell on it too. We could've at least worked things out. Not that I minded this proof of yours, of course."

I nodded a little and held onto her quietly.

“Promise you’ll keep me in the loop with how you’re feeling about this relationship?” she prodded.

“Of course. We’re in it together.”

“Duh,” she laughed, wriggling herself back against me. “Sometimes it sounds like you’re quoting lines from a movie.”

I lifted my head a little to seek out that spot on her neck that I had decided was the perfect place to kiss. “Mmf. Sorry.”

Kris wiggled all the more before turning in my grasp to face me, hugging one of her arms up around my back and staring me in the eye. “I’m serious, Cor. Promise you’ll keep talking to me if you keep feeling like that.”

I nodded and did my best to hold her gaze. “Promise.”

* * *

“This,” Thomas declared in a reverent tone. “Is *Salvia divinorum*.”

I blinked up from my computer. “What?”

“*Salvia!*” he repeated, dropping his backpack unceremoniously and flopping down onto his bed. “It’s a hallucinogen, I guess, but it’s legal. Got it at a head shop just off campus.”

I twisted myself around in my chair.

Thomas laughed, “I knew that would get your attention. Couldn’t get you any shrooms, sorry, but I figured this is the next best thing.”

“Hey,” I grinned. “And it’s legal, too. Thanks for thinking of that.”

Thomas nodded and pulled a ziplock bag smaller than a matchbook from the plastic bag and frisbeed it across to me. It was labelled with a hand-written sticker saying ‘S. div. 20x 1.1g 15-’. All it contained what looked to be a dried up leaf crumpled up into flakes. I pinched it dubiously between my fingers. “Looks like oregano.”

“Well,” Thomas countered. “If it is, I’m out fifteen dollars. Oh well.”

“So what’s it do, then?”

“Well, it’s a hallucinogen, like I said. Makes you kinda... see shit and have all sorts of grand thoughts.” He brightened up, “Here, give it back. Tell you what. I’ll try it and tell you what it’s like.”

I laughed and tossed the baggie back to Thomas, “Well, okay. If you freak out, I’m getting out of here and denying everything.”

Thomas nodded, so I set myself as away on instant messengers and IRC. “The cool part,” he explained, shifting himself to sit cross legged on the floor, reaching hand underneath his bed for the shoe box of drug paraphenalia I knew he kept there. “The cool part is that it only lasts, like, five minutes or sorather than, like, six hours for shrooms or acid.”

I nodded a little and shifted onto the floor as well so we’d be level with each other. “Well, what is it, exactly?”

“Leaves off some plant. They told me at the shop that you need to smoke a fuck ton of the plain leaf, so they sold me some extact. I got twenty ex stuff, since that was the most concentrated they sold, and I figured that’d be better.”

He worked as he spoke, picking a glass pot pipe out of the box and examining it. He seemed to be pondering emptying it out, but after looking at the tiny size of the flakes of Salvia, he seemed to change his mind. Resting the pipe on one of his knees, he opened the tiny baggie with his fingers and delicately pinched a small amount into the bowl of the pipe. If he had laid all of the peices flat on a table, it probably would've only taken up the area of a dime.

Closing the bag, he cradled the pipe in his palm, digging his lighter out of his pocket with his free hand. "So if I freak out or something, which I probably won't, just, like, keep me quiet for ten minutes or so, I should be good."

"Thanks for the reassurance," I muttered sarcastically. My palms were sweating enough to leave damp patches on my knees where they rested. I had been bugging Thomas about trying hallucinogens every since I found out just how much he was into drugs, but he had always just waved me off, complaining that such things were difficult to procure.

"Alright," he muttered, taking a few deep breaths and letting his shoulders drop as he relaxed. Finally, he brought the stem of the pipe up to his lips and, holding the lighter to the plant material in the bowl, drew the smoke in deep. His hands started to shake as he set the pipe down quickly on the upturned lid of the shoebox, dropping his lighter into his lap as his eyes screwed shut. He held the smoke for about twenty seconds before coughing it out like a bubble of cloud.

He collapsed back against the edge of his bed while his right hand grasped the frame of it, keeping him from sliding down onto his side. "Nnnnnn," he said, nodding and smiling to me. The smile turned into a grin, the grin to a snicker, and the snicker burst into gales of laughter, startling me. Holding himself up like that, he laughed and laughed and laughed. The laughter went on for probably a minute and a half before finally slowing down, dropping nearly an octave to his low, stoned chuckle that I was so used to.

After another thirty seconds or so, he leaned his body forward in a slow swinging motion to rest his forearms on his knees, propping himself up. He swayed slightly in this position, another half a minute passing by before he shifted his arms so that his elbows rested on his knees and he could prop his chin up on his fists.

"W-weird," he drawled.

"What the hell was that, Thomas?" I realised I was clutching the denim of my jeans in my fists and relaxed my hands, wiping the perspiration off on my thighs, "What happened?"

"Dunno, man," he smiled beatifically. "Dunno."

I let him sit there for a few minutes while he seemed to sober up. Finally, he shook his head and lit a stick of the incense, opening the window and moving sluggishly to drop a towel along the base of the door, something we had forgotten to do earlier. Finally, he continued, "I felt like the earth tilted down and to the left and that something was really, really funny, but I never knew what." He swallowed drily and grabbed a Mountain Dew out of the fridge before returning to his spot on the floor. "Lot shorter than I thought. How long did it last?"

"Uh... about three minutes, I'd say," I smiled. This didn't sound like a

hallucinogen, but it did sound resonably fun. Thomas' reaction to the drug relaxed me some.

"Holy fuck," he laughed, drinking about a third of the soda in one go. "Felt like ten, fifteen seconds. Cool."

We sat for a few minutes, Thomas finishing his drink and me fingering the hem of my shirt.

Finally, he tossed his bottle toward the trash, missed horribly, and chuckled. "Still kinda stoned feeling. Wanna try?"

I took a shaky breath and nodded, watching as he reloaded the bowl with a small pinch of the Salvia. I took the offered pipe and lighter and sat for a few moments, holding them in my lap and looking down at them. I shook my head finally and, before I lost my nerve, brought the stem of the pipe to my lips, inhaling the smoke deep as Thomas had done.

The Salvia burned quickly and there was surprisingly little smoke, though the smoke was parched and hurt my throat. Holding it in despite the sting, I quickly set the pipe and lighter down in front of me on the floor. I held the smoke for what I guessed was a count to thirty before huffing it out at once, feeling a bubble of amusement rise in my chest. Breathing out the smoke, I felt like I had blown myself backwards. This was kind of funny, I thought.

The amusement froze in my chest and I felt gravity turn beneath me, the ground suddenly sinister. I reached out and clawed at my mattress, tugging feebly at my sheets as I was pulled inexorably down onto my side with gravity trying to suck me under the bed. There was a persistant rhythmic sound, like someone hyperventillating on the consonant 't', a little less than twice per second, maybe a hundred beats per minute. More than the sound, the rhythm was a sensation — something dry and rasping was stroking against the inside of the back of my skull, feeling rather like strokes of a cat tongue.

My eyelids stuttered close as time slowed. I felt as though I was watching a video game on a slow computer, the framerate of my eyelids covering my vision having to be redrawn several times a second.

Terror. The rhythm became my existence for what seemed like a short eternity, and I felt compressed on all sides as though I was being smothered with very soft weights. I couldn't move.

Terror. The weight began to lessen and it felt as though each of those rhythmic pulses was a gash of reality peeking through into my mind. Some reality more real and raw than I had ever experienced.

Terror. Memories of words and snippets of conversation flipped through my mind during the dark phases between the flashes of reality. What must've been the bed frame was digging into my side, but the word 'monster' flashed before my eyes in the dark and I felt as though I was being eaten.

Terror. I struggled to sit up as my eyes open and light bled into my my brain. I saw everything not as objects, but as borders; the edge of the fridge was just a line separating a black area from an off-white area. There was a man-shaped blend of colors leaning near to me. I nodded at this strange thing knowingly.

Terror. I crawled from my spot on the floor and up onto my bed, where gravity pulled me definitively down onto my back. I watched from within as, without the bed eating me, everything became internalized. I felt as though I was just an area, myself, that my ego was defined by a border.

Terror. The border ruptured as I watched and I convulsed as my straining self rushed out of my body. It felt as though I was dying. Everything about me was getting lost in a universe of lights.

Terror subsiding. I suddenly realized that this didn't hurt, that dying didn't feel bad. I had simply lost my concept of self.

Relax. I wasn't a person any more, I was a part of humanity. Purer, brighter, lighter, more innocent than a person. Every other part of humanity seemed connected and close by. I must be coming down, I thought comfortably. The sense of self-ness was returning, and memories were starting to come back. The rhythm decrescendoeoed into a sense of waves. Relax. Kris wandered into my thoughts and I smiled. This was a person I felt affection for. This was a very puzzling thought, one that I couldn't quite wrap my mind around. I couldn't define affection, nor my feelings for Kris.

The Salvia gravity relented enough for me to sit up in bed and I looked around the room. Thomas was sitting in the center of the room now, pipe and lighter in hand. I waved at him and he burst out laughing. He said something, but my ears were buzzing too loudly for me to hear. Finally, I twisted a little, stretching out my back and shaking my head.

Another minute or so and Thomas and I were talking again. I felt, as Thomas had said, a little stoned. It wasn't a happy sort of stoned — it wasn't emotional at all. I just felt slow and sluggish.

"That shit must've just rolled over on you, man."

I laughed, "What happened?"

"Well, you set the pipe down pretty quickly and frowned, then you sorta laughed out the smoke. You said 'whoa' and fell over onto your side. You just sorta lay there for a bit, shaking your head occasionally. Then you, like, flipped out and climbed up onto the bed and lay down there, breathing all fast." He shrugged and passed me one of his sodas from the fridge, "After a few seconds you said 'huh' a few times and started to relax. You were tense as fuck for a while there. I was going to ask you what was up when you sat up and waved at me."

I laughed again and nodded, drinking some of the Mountain Dew down gratefully, letting it cool my throat. It tasted like soda water, for some reason. "Weird as hell. Felt like gravity shifted for me, too, and pulled me onto my side." I grinned, "I thought the bed was eating me so I climbed up onto it."

Thomas laughed too, "Fuckin' trippy."

I tapped out the rhythm on my leg, explaining, "It felt like it was trying to eat my thoughts or something, licking at my mind about this fast. It was better when I got on the bed but I felt, like... uh... I don't know. Like I couldn't define myself or me or I anymore."

"Ego-death," Thomas nodded. "Had that when I did shrooms. Was fun."

“Was fucking scary as hell,” I corrected him. “Though after a bit I guess I kind of accepted it. That’s when I started coming down.”

Thomas nodded and leaned back against his bed, dropping the Salvia and pipe back into the box before nudging it under the bed again. The room smelled like Nag Champa still, so I figured he had burned a little more of the incense. “Fuckin’ trippy,” he muttered again, shaking his head and lumbering over to his desk where he started up his laptop. I shifted myself off of my bed and over to my own computer, shaking the mouse to wake it back up since it seemed that Thomas had other things to do.

I checked to see if Kris was online. She wasn’t, so I left myself set as away and opened up a text editor, figuring I’d write out my thoughts.

I sat for a few minutes staring at the blank screen. The windows still looked to me like how I had perceived the room in my moment of terror, as more border than anything substantial. Finally, I begun writing, haltingly and pausing often to think and stare at my screen.

HOW I BRIEFLY WENT CRAZY

or

MAKE ME ONE WITH EVERYTHING

My roommate gave me some salvia and told me to smoke it. Being the open-minded individual I try to be, I decided I’d go ahead, despite the risk of seeming like a druggie, something I worry about a lot more than I probably should. I watched my roommate try before I did, figuring I would get an idea of what happened. He laughed like a crazy man for about three minutes, and in another minute, he was back to his normal stoner self, saying that he didn’t know what he was laughing about. Seemed fun enough.

There were three levels to the trip, and I’ll go through each in turn.

ACTUAL:

This is what happened outside of the trip. Most of this was found out second-hand from my roommate, who was watching the whole process. I smoked a tiny pinch of 20x salvia extract (note to self: look this up later) and held the smoke for several seconds. I put the pipe down while I was holding the smoke and frowned, then laughed the smoke out. I proceeded to say ‘whoa’ and tip over onto my side, where I layed still except for occasionally shaking my head. Eventually, I seemed to freak out, then climbed back up onto the bed where I stayed tense before finally relaxing. I sat up after a bit and waved at my roommate, who laughed. By then, I was just about down.

PHYSICAL:

Everything was as described up until the time I laughed. I blew out the smoke and thought I was blowing myself backwards, but then it felt like gravity was shifting beneath me and despite

trying to stop myself, I fell over onto my side, pulled there by gravity. I remember closing my eyes and watching it like that scene from Tron where the protagonist is traced into the computer program, but that's all I remember for a little bit. Except for the rhythmic pulse I heard and felt against the back of my head. With the frame digging into my back, it felt as though I was being eaten by the bed, so I crawled up on top of it to get away. This was one of the scariest things I had ever felt, so I stayed tense in bed until I started to come down, relaxing and feeling more comfortable.

MENTAL:

Mentally, I spent most of the time terrified of what was happening. After I thought the bed was eating me, I looked around and lost the concept of space, seeing borders of things instead of the things themselves. I climbed back into bed and experienced what my roommate called ego-death. I felt like I was disappearing as a person and simply part of a larger whole of everything. It seems cliché now, but I felt like I was starting to become one with everything, and it was terrifying. Finally I started to accept it, and that's when I started to come down from everything.

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So what does it all mean? I know I shouldn't look for meaning in the random misfirings of the brain on drugs, but the whole experience of ego-death was startling and felt extraordinarily deep. It makes me feel that I would be a fool to not take anything from this experience. I know that I'll be digesting this whole thing for a long time to come. It has sobered me up to the raw truth embedded in reality, and I'm starting to see everything in a whole new light. When I was coming down, Kris came to mind and I felt like I was seeing my affection for her from some sort of objective standpoint. I don't know how to explain it, but it felt as though it was just sort of a fact of who we were as people. Not destiny, just that that's how we were made to react towards each other.

I guess the net experience from the salvia is that everything was put into perspective. All of the terror and all of the weird physical and visual anomalies were just static produced by this foreign substance coursing through my body. The truly valuable part was the kernel of truth I gleaned from the matter. It showed me that my interactions between myself and others are always on the terms of me being a person, and of them being sort of projections from myself. Ego-death showed me how much deeper things really could be. It would be terrifying, but being able to experience someone as a truly separate entity as my sense of self dissolved would, I think, get me much closer to them in the

long run. It brings to mind some experimenting that Kris and I could do, though I'm not sure that plumbing the depths of fear is something you really want to plan on doing with someone you like.

I saved the file with some sort of innocuous name that I hoped I would remember, leaning back in my chair and listening to Thomas playing music on his laptop, staring out the window instead. Now that I was down from the experience, I didn't feel so objective about my affection for Kris anymore. I felt incredibly strongly to be honest, almost as though I needed to see her right now.

I opted for a little bit of restraint instead and made my way back over to my bed so that I could sprawl out on my back comfortably, thinking of Kris, of all that had transpired in the last few weeks, and of how little gender really meant. When one ignored the dissonance created by acting contrary to what was expected by the self and others, it was liberating. It felt honest, truthful, and it made me happy.

But I had been finding, of course, that there are always consequences of dissonance, and those chaotic consequences stretched farther and wider than I would ever be able to predict.

* * *

"Sup, druggie," Kris jibed, elbowing me in the ribs as she accelerated to walk next to me. With less than a week before finals, we had made a study date at one of the local coffee houses off campus.

"Yeesh, nice to see you too, stoner," I shot back.

She laughed and threaded her hand through my arm as I leaned over to kiss her on the temple. "At least I like innocuous drugs that don't do a whole lot."

"They certainly make you goofy."

"Yeah," She rolled her eyes. "But I don't see things on pot."

I nodded, "True, I guess. I didn't really see anything on Salvia, though, either." I went on to explain the whole experience, from being eaten by the bed to ego-death.

"Sounds, well, unpleasant," Kris frowned, kicking bits of snow into Laurel Street, the northern border of campus, as we strolled along the sidewalk.

"Yeah, it kinda was," I mumbled, recalling the terror. "But... I don't know. It was scary, but it was a respectful kind of fear. Still trying to digest the whole thing," I trailed off.

"Respectful fear?" She sounded incredulous.

"Yeah. Like it could've easily destroyed me, but showed me something beautiful instead."

Kris was silent for a little bit, eventually leaning her head on my shoulder briefly. "To be honest, none of what you said sounds beautiful."

I laughed. "I suppose not. Beautiful in the way that a volcano or lightning is, I guess." I struggled for words, coming up with, "Like, watching the concept of myself dissolving was as terrifying as real death, but it also made me feel more... connected, I guess. I still feel kind of that way."

“Connected? Now you sound like a Boulder hippie.”

“Hah! Well, I hope I never get to be that bad. I just mean that compared to how I used to feel and act, everything seems more connected. I’m not as insular anymore.”

Kris snorted a laugh. “Insular. Weird, boy. How does a drug make you all that more connected?”

I felt my ears redden and a bit of indignation rise in my chest, as if I had a sudden need to be believed and taken seriously. I quelled the feelings, doing my best to keep Kris’ sense of humor in mind. “I think the drug showed me just how much I saw everyone else as a projection of myself, and now I have to try to fix that and see people for who they really are.”

“Ain’t that life,” Kris said, smiling. She squeezed my arm in her hand before stuffing it into her hoodie’s monopocket with the other to warm it against the chill. “So what part of your self did you see me as a projection of?”

“Oh, hell, I don’t know,” I laughed. “The funny part? The good looking part? Maybe the feminine aspect?”

She shouldered me into the post of the stoplight. “Flatterer. Come on, let’s cross.”

The coffee house was a second-story affair that labeled itself as ‘The Alley Cat Open 24hrs.’ and, despite her apparent dislike of Boulder hippies, the place rather looked like it belonged to one of them. The ceiling tiles were each painted by, it looked like, random people ranging in ability from what looked to be kindergardeners to professionals. The countertop was covered with sheet copper that looked like it had been polished with espresso and steel wool, while the parquet seemed to have been polished more by dirty shoes and approximately five hundred years time. The barista working behind the counter seems to have considered herself a human canvas, and I judged her to be seventy percent tattoo.

“This place is amazing,” I announced. Kris and the barista laughed.

“What can I get for you two?”

“White-mocha-for-here,” Kris said, pronouncing her order as one word as if she practiced ordering coffee drinks fairly regularly.

“Coffee, I guess.”

I was instructed that there were, in fact, three types of coffee served in two sizes, and that wasn’t counting the fact that I could order their iced coffee hot in either of the two sizes if I so desired. If I wanted, of course, any of these could be spiked with a shot of espresso. Or I could get an americano if I liked the taste of espresso but just wanted it in coffee strength.

I leaned heavily against the counter under the weight of the decision. “Oh man...” I breathed. “You guys are my heroes. Um... I guess I’ll try a small house coffee to start with.”

The barista laughed and nodded, totalling the order up for me to pay while Kris went to find a table, no two of which looked to be the same. I watched as my coffee was ground to order and made in a porcelain drip maker I had never really seen before. Still overwhelmed with the reality of such a coffee shop, I picked up my drink and wandered down along the bar, eyes glazing over

at the stacks of jarred tea and the hulk of the coffee devices — water heater, drip coffee grinder, espresso grinder, espresso machine, two blenders, and two fridges. I decided it would be heaven to work here.

“Cor, over here.” Kris beckoned me over to a table on the other half of the building and I made my way over in a daze. The table was a sort of bile yellow colored laminate with aluminum sides, furnished with one green kitchen chair and one grey upholstered chair of the type one would find in a hotel convention room. “Gawking around?”

“This place is awesome,” I reaffirmed with conviction.

She laughed and, once I sat down, gave one of my hands a squeeze, “Cute. You’re right, too, this place is awesome.”

I shook my head in amazement before setting my backpack down on the floor and pulling out my theory book. “Have to come here more often. I need to make my way through their coffee menu.”

“You know, I think you had it wrong,” Kris said, pulling out some of her own books. “I think I’m your simpler side, the calmer side.”

I snorted, “Simpler, maybe, but I don’t know about calmer.”

“Less caffeinated, then,” she countered, to which I had no argument.

The hiss of the steamer on the espresso machine was followed a scant ten seconds later with our tattooed coffee mistress setting a bowl of a coffee cup down in front of Kris. The contents looked mild and frothy and through some trick of pouring, the barista had drawn what looked to be a leaf in the foam by way of pouring carefully. Thusly served, we set to work.

I made it halfway through trying to memorize chord classifications before I realized I was spending more time staring off into space and thinking than I was studying. I shifted to lean back more comfortably in my chair and slid the theory book down into my lap so that it rested back against the metallic edge of the table, giving up on writing so that I could just read, sipping at my coffee in a vain attempt to snap myself out of it and get more on task.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that Kris was right. I think she did represent a simpler side of life to me. She seemed to focus mostly on enjoying herself, which was why she had picked the major she did. Her choice had left her with her time reading what she enjoyed rather than, like me, tromping in lockstep with hundreds of other instrumentalists playing stupid music for a stupid game while dressed in stupid outfits. Her family life had been simple, while mine involved divorces and step parents and a long drive. Not that I faulted my parents or felt at fault myself, simply that Kris’ life always seemed a lot simpler.

And, of course, there loomed ever on the horizon that a heterosexual relationship would be simpler than a homosexual relationship by far. Not, of course, the actual relationship between me and Kris, but with the way the world dealt with it.

I frowned and flipped to the next section in my theory book, scanning over the text with a divided mind. No, the free part thought, things hadn’t exactly been simpler. My feelings for Kris had caused all sorts of backlash in various subtle ways from parents and friends.

And from yourself, a part of me added. All this worrying seemed to be part of the package deal of going out with someone outside of what myself and everyone had expected of me. All the fears of being too gay to be in a straight relationship still burned inside of me despite all of my logical and emotional reasoning to counter them. Every time I had pictured myself settling down with Kris in however unrealistic a situation, a doubt would always burn away at the edges of the image; a doubt that I could ever be able to fully settle down with a girl and live up to all of the expectations that I figured would come with it.

I was brought out of my reverie by a kick to the shin from across the table. “Cor,” Kris grinned. “You studying?”

I smiled and hefted my theory book.

“I know, but you were staring at the wall.”

Caught in my daydreaming, I grinned sheepishly and shrugged, reaching for my coffee, which surprised me by being rather cool. I had smoked the Salvia on Sunday and despite it being now Tuesday, I still noticed that time and I seemed to be rather out of sync for the past few days. “Just thinking,” I mumbled, finishing off my coffee quickly.

Kris folded her book in her lap and sipped at the last of her own drink, “Tell me about it?”

“Just a sec, and I will.” I slid the theory book back up onto the table and took my cup with me to procure more coffee; I went for the darkest of the three drip-coffee options this time.

When I returned, Kris had closed her book around her notebook to hold her place and was leaning forward, chin on fist, as she examined the paintings on the wall, all of which seemed to be done by the same person. I figured the shop acted as something of a gallery as well. She smiled at me when I sat back down, saying, “So, what’s up?”

I slouched in my chair again and rested my coffee against my belly, using the slight bit of weight I had added to my already stocky body from eating so much dorm food as a bit of a shelf. “Just about what you said, about being my simpler side.”

“How so?”

“Well,” I shrugged. “I guess you’re right, I was sort of projecting what I thought of as simple onto you.”

She screwed up her face, “Oh, thanks.”

“Not that way,” I added in exasperation. “Just, like... my ideal of a simpler life less complicated by everything, I suppose.”

Kris nodded and brushed her foot up alongside my calf. “Hmm. I guess I could see that. Like being with a girl?”

The question felt loaded, but I nodded anyway, quickly explaining, “I might’ve thought so a few months ago, but I don’t think that’s really the case anymore. Not after Jamen and my parents and all that stuff with myself even.”

“Oh, so I’m difficult, then?” she laughed.

“Yes, very much so,” I smirked, shaking my head. “Nah, I think things are just as complicated as they always are with relationships. Gender doesn’t enter

into it for most of it.”

Kris thought for a moment. She seemed to be picking her questions carefully. “Are there things where gender does enter into it?”

“Well, of course, considering I lived for four years as a gay guy and after having a few relationships, suddenly decide to go out with a girl. Like how I got all nervous and stuff.” I hastened to add, “Which I don’t think is that big of a problem anymore.”

“No?”

“Well, not really. I mean, I still have some doubts sometimes, but they don’t really mean anything. I still like you, after all, and,” I lowered my voice, “sex isn’t really an issue, it seems.”

Kris laughed and gave me another kick to the shin, leaning forward to rest her arms on the table, “I’m not trying to talk you into a corner, really. You sound so desperate for me to believe you.”

I grinned and lowered my head a little, sipping at my coffee.

“I do believe you,” she smiled. “If that’s what you need to hear me say.”

“Well, I didn’t really need to hear anything, was just talking to fill the space after you asked,” I leaned forward as well so that I could brush a few fingertips over her arms. “Of course, it doesn’t hurt to hear that.”

Kris smiled down at her empty cup and at my gesture before straightening up. “Come on. You can slack off, but I need to study.”

* * *

The hall was dead quiet. Far quieter than any normal Friday night and weekend, but since finals started on Monday, we had been put under a set of rules that was apparently more conducive to studying. It meant that I had to listen to my music with headphones on or the volume very low, even though Thomas was, of course, no where to be seen. Of the umpteen weekends I had spent in the dorms so far, I think he had stayed in for the whole weekend only twice: once when he was sick, and once when the party was at our place.

Kris had decided that, since she had two finals on Monday and two on Tuesday that she needed to pass, she would be holed up in her dorm for quite a while. I had two finals on Tuesday myself — one being the composition final that Kris and I shared, and one on Wednesday before I was finished. With days before my own finals, I felt as though I was holed up in my room by circumstance more than choice.

Oh well, I thought. Having the place to myself would be good for me. I was able to get a little bit of studying done, all of my notes spread out over the floor in a loose grid so that I could walk amongs them in bare feet and connect ideas together in ways that I thought would help me on the exams. I spent a good deal of time talking to friends on the Internet as well, catching up with people on IRC that I felt as though I had been neglecting with school and a brand new personal life intervening.

Jamen came by on Friday night and apologized once again for the way he had acted before. I had gratefully accepted his company and his offering of shitty

beer that Joseph, his roommate, had procured. We spent a while talking about this and that, how the semester was going, what finals looked like. Everything but what we had talked about two weeks previous. He seemed happy enough, bright eyed and sober (not stoned, at least). He mentioned that he wasn't smoking until after his finals were over, just so that he could concentrate on studying for the exams.

Erin and Eric came over to talk for a while as well, since Erin had been kicked out of her room for a few hours by Kris. We wound up eating together that night, Erin giving me one of her guest-passes to the dorm since I had used the last of my meal plan up on lunch that day. They promised that they would try help keep me fed with guest passes when I needed them, though with about a hundred dollars left in my bank account, I figured I would be alright.

By Saturday afternoon, all the thrills of being by myself had worn off. I had slept naked for the first time since I had moved to school, which wasn't as exciting as I had thought. I even wandered around the room naked for a while, but all that did was make me feel nervous, even though the blinds were shut and the door locked to everyone but Thomas. I listened to music for a while and reorganized my notes for class before spending the rest of the morning and into the afternoon on IRC.

Finally fed up, I bundled myself against the early December snow that was sending light flurries down outside and started walking. I remembered that there was a super market on College south of campus and I decided that a good use of my time would be to go pick up something to hold me over through finals week until I could head home. The walk was cold, but I figured the brisk air would do me well rather than being cooped up in my dorm with nothing to do but sit at the computer with no clothes on.

I guess I had misremembered the distance down College to the super market. The walk had taken me about forty five minutes and the cloudy sky was lit distinctly from the west by the time I got to the store. A clock told me it was three thirty. About an hour and a half left until dark. I hurried down the aisles with a car, getting myself some tortillas and cheese for quesadillas. I decided against anything to drink since I would be carrying all of that back home in my emptied out backpack, racing the sunset. Instead, some bread, peanut butter, and honey joined the quesadilla makings in order for something sweet. Finally, I filled a plastic bag with granola from the bulk grains section, figuring that I now had enough carbohydrates and protein to keep me going for another few days. Anything else I needed I could probably get from the general store on campus, worst case scenario.

With everything purchased and stuffed into my backpack, I made my way back outside and groaned. During the fifteen minutes I was in the store, the snow had picked up and the light from the west was settling more toward the mountains; everything was darker now that the sunlight had to pass through the clouds at an acute angle. I shrugged both straps of the backpack onto my shoulders and zipped my jacket up, heading towards College and back north. I had walked over a pedestrian underpass on the way over, and I figured I'd try to take that back so I wouldn't have to walk along the town's busiest street now

that the snow had picked up.

Once I made my way to that trail and through another underpass, this time under the railroad tracks, I found myself at the foot of an asphalt trail that wound through an open expanse of a field that stretched out on all sides of me. Much calmer, I told myself, trying to keep looking on the brighter side. I trudged through the thin layer of snow that had accumulated on the path and let my mind wander with nothing but the white expanse of the field and the staticky, snow obscured road half a mile away to look at.

I spent the walk along the path worrying about winter break. There were four weeks and some between the end of my finals on Wednesday and the first day of the second semester. About a month of time where I would be required to move back home. About a month of time without Kris, having to stay with one parent or the other. I figured I could always crash at a friend's place, but I doubt if crashing at Kris' parents house would be a very likely possibility. I was pretty sure that my dad would be alright with Kris staying over when I was at his place, but I certainly couldn't tell one way or the other how Kris' parents would feel about that idea.

I wondered about the possibility of us meeting somewhere else during the break, either alone or with some mutual friends, where we could spend some time together. If nothing else, I figured I might be able to find a way between my mom's and dad's that took me through Boulder so that I could at least spend a few hours with my girlfriend. I supposed it would make the trip much longer. Hopefully I could either find a job with a good schedule or maybe do some odd computer jobs here and there to get myself some gas money for the transit. My dad had wanted me to go into computer science, but the fact that I wasn't good at programming, just setting up and administering systems, had swayed me away from that. I could always hire myself out as computer help.

I trudged up toward campus again once I made it off the trail. I still had finals week to figure everything out, and the walk had made me hungry. A quesadilla was a much happier thing to think about.

* * *

Come Monday, I decided it was finally time to really get down and study. I woke up at about eleven in the afternoon and lazed around with some coffee, listening to music, and by noon, I pulled out my theory book for the start of the studying. I figured I could catch up with Kris after all of her finals with the excuse of studying for our shared exam by Tuesday.

Theory, it turned out, was one of my strong points. Everything in music fits together so well, and just by looking at it, I was starting to recognize how things worked and, more importantly for my grade, why some things didn't work. Most of what we had been learning in class for this semester was what was called functional harmony for the early baroque period. This was about the time that all the rules were solidified in western music, solidifying the sound of the times into what we now know from Bach and his ilk.

Each chord is given a symbol when discussed theoretically. The tonic, the main key of the piece that everything revolved around, was the roman numeral

'T'. Chords could be numbered sequentially after that, changing the case of the numerals in order to show how they sounded (lower case being minor, upper case being major). So, continuing through the subsequent tones of a major scale, we get the following succession:

I ii iii IV V vi vii°

That final chord, the seven chord, is neither major nor minor, but diminished, thus the funny symbol afterwards. The difference between all of those chords is in the way they're constructed. A major chord is a major third topped with a minor third, a minor chord is a minor third topped with a major third, and the diminished chord is a minor third topped with a minor third. With both the major chords and the minor chords, the two outer pitches form a perfect fifth, which is the second most consonant sounding interval after the octave, but with the diminished triad, this fifth is, well, diminished. The resulting interval, called a tritone, is arguably the most dissonant of intervals. This comes into play later, with the concept of resolution.

Now, chords are all well and good, but you can't just throw chords together willy nilly. Or, rather, you can, and it's called panchordalism, but not in functional harmony. Those crazy folk back in the seventeen hundreds found that the human ear likes it best when one thing progresses to the next, so they came up with certain rules for producing music that sounds like it progresses naturally. Of course, for the next three hundred years, composers struggled to break this system and pull away from it as much as possible, but it does provide a good foundation for a theoretical knowledge of music. Rules were made to be broken, but you have to learn the rules, first. In order to help us out, theoreticians came up with the concept of classifying chords.

I_T ii₂ iii₄ IV₂ V₁ vi₃ vii°₁

Those numbers next to the chords now show their classification. The rules of the game are to count down towards 'T' as much as possible, and 'T' can go anywhere. With this new set of data, we can now easily construct a simple chord progression just by counting down:

I_T iii₄ vi₃ ii₂ V⁷₁ I_T

This now gives us a harmonic sequence that actually goes some place. That '7' after the dominant (five) chord indicates that we should add the seventh note counting up from the root pitch of that chord, adding another minor third on top of the chord. Now, notice that if you take away the bottom pitch of those four notes to get three once more, you get that vii° chord from earlier, which means that there is a tritone buried inside that V⁷ chord. That tritone is what gives the chord its quality of unfinished business, driving it to resolve to the tonic more strongly than a simple dominant would.

All of this is fairly abstract, of course. If you look at a keyboard, you will more readily see how this concept of resolution works. Let's respell the chords as if we were working the key of C, which is easiest to visualize on the piano. Our available chords then become

C d e F G a b°

and our progression then becomes

C e a d G⁷ C

If you have a piano, you can play this through using all white keys, and when you do, you can see how the resolution of the tritone (the notes b and f) leads to the interval being reduced by half a step on either side into the major third of the one chord. This, I had decided, was one of the coolest things about music. Not only where there the vertical aspects of chords, but the horizontal aspect of time. Not only was there a need to move from one sound to another, but when rhythm comes into play, everything becomes all that much more complicated. The same goes for all of the different concepts in music: they're simple but, but by starting to add them together, the music becomes exponentially more complex.

I sat back in my chair thinking about this rather than actually studying for quite a while. I found it much more interesting trying to dissect life in the same way — trying to pick out all of those vertical aspects amongs the horizontal aspect of times and the diagonal skew that emotions put on everything — than worrying music theory. I was confident enough in that area.

Relationships, I thought, must be some sort of infinitely tall vertical aspect in life, and that aspect continued onto the horizontal plane as time changed and modified the relationship. Of course, being in both the horizontal and vertical planes meant that relationships are more shapes than just linear structures. One could paint a picture (a very abstract one) of the relationships in one's life, with each shape being a relationship I winced at the logical conclusion of thinking of the beginnings and endings of relationships.

Chris, the ex that everyone had liked and that had ruined me so completely for a period of time, had wound up in a new relationship before finishing the relationship that he was already in with me. Those two shapes in his life would, I suppose, look as if they were dove-tailed together or perhaps mine would taper to a point as it was quashed under the weight of the newer, apparently more exciting relationship. I didn't know his new boyfriend, so I couldn't say that the shapes would overlap.

I closed my book and tossed it onto the bed, realizing just how far away from music theory I'd gotten. I wanted to tease this idea apart as if it was a knotted ball of string, so I was willing to just sit back in my chair and half-listen to music while I thought.

My chest ached with the remembered loss as I pulled memory after memory out of the disorganized pile of hyperbole. Chris and I had lasted for more than a year together. Even though he lived in Denver, he was an avid skier and had an older brother that was as well. We had met on the slopes just outside of town and had hit it off right away. He kept coming back weekend after weekend for quite a while, staying in one of the cheapest hotels around with his brother so that they could spend the whole weekend skiing. After a while, they had started staying over at my place since my mom had liked him.

Due to his parents being rather unfavorable to his sexuality, I never did visit him where he lived. His brother, thankfully, was okay with the whole thing and acted as something of an enabler of our relationship. Not only was Chris' brother into skiing, but kayaking as well, which gave Chris an excuse to come up and visit during the summer. He never really told me for most of the relationship what his parents thought of the fact that he and his brother had started spending so much time so far away, but I got feeling that they weren't too positive on the whole thing. In fact, that was the reason he gave for breaking up with me, but it wasn't until a week or so after the fact that I got a phone call from his brother explaining what had really happened.

Chris, it seems, had been spending more and more time with someone much more local to him, and his brother had walked in on them a week before Chris ended our relationship. His brother had urged Chris to pick one or the other, even if he had to lie to do so. Seeing how hurt I was, he had said, he decided to call and let me know the truth of the matter. He told me to keep in touch if I needed any emotional support for him, that he considered me his friend after this long year of seeing me on weekends as he had.

I had called Chris' brother once or twice after some particularly harsh fights both online and over the phone with Chris, but after a week or two of all this and much concern on the part of both of my parents, I had finally just dropped the whole thing. I didn't use the computer for anything but homework for about a month and a half, and only answered my cell phone if I saw that it was my parents calling. I didn't answer the house phone at all.

Even almost two years later, I'm still not sure how much good cutting myself off so completely from the whole situation did me, though as time goes by, I was starting to see it as a necessary part of getting over the relationship. Chris hadn't given me any closure to things, so I took the time to make my own closure, however painful.

I shook my head and rubbed my face briskly with my hands, rocking forward in my chair to bat at my keyboard, startling my computer out of wakefulness. I had Kris now, I thought, checking to see if she was online or if she had left me any messages on one of the many social networking websites that had popped up recently. Kris was different, and, I thought, even if the relationship did end, she was local, so hopefully closure would be easier to reach. Kris was the current shape on ever-widening canvas of my life, whatever that meant.

I was startled out of my reverie by a knock at the door, two taps followed by a syncopated tap after. I got up quickly enough to knock over my chair and bounded over to swing the door open to let my girlfriend in.

"Hey!" she cried. "That was quick. You waiting for me?"

I grinned and gave her a quick hug and a kiss on the forehead before letting her the rest of the way into my room, "Well, sort of, I guess. Just recognize your knock now."

"Mmf. Good, well let me in so I can set my shit down."

I nodded and stood to the side so she could slip past, leaving a trail of debris as she went; backpack, one shoe, gloves, jacket, the other shoe, and my theory book made a neat trail from the door to my bed, pointing the way to Kris as

she lay facedown in my covers. I followed this detritus to the girl and sat down next to her, trailing my fingertips up and down her spine.

“Oh God, Cor,” she said muffledly. “Keep that up.”

I nodded despite the fact that she couldn’t see me, bringing both of my hands into play in order to draw straight lines down her back with my fingertips, massaging my way back up to her shoulders only to do it again. “That bad, huh?”

“I guess,” she groaned. “I mean, I think I did well, just that I had to use all the time, and that’s, like, four hours in those shitty chairs. I feel like I got punched in the back several times, plus a kick to the head for good measure.”

“Aw, pobrecita,” I murmured affectionately. “Want some aspirin or something?”

“Nah, just rub my neck or something.”

I complied, rubbing my hands up her back so that I could rub and stroke my fingers up in against her neck, massaging at the base of her skull, trailing up into her hair a little as well.

“You’re my hero,” she sighed. “So what’d you spend your day off doing? Talking on the internets?”

I laughed and stretched out next to Kris on the sliver of bed I had at my disposal, propping my head up with one hand while the other one toyed with her hair. “Nah, studied some, listened to music, thought a lot.”

“Yeah? What about?”

I shrugged and drew spirals down along her back with my fingertips, “Class, and an ex.”

Kris turned her head to look at me, so I took the opportunity to kiss at her cheek. “Tell me about it?” she asked.

“Oh, he just sorta... dove-tailed relationships. Started a new one before ours was finished. Was just thinking back on the mess that caused.”

She nodded, “Any particular reason why?”

I shrugged and grinned, “Nah, just kinda started thinking about it.”

“Well, was it really messy?”

“Yeah. We had some angry calls back and forth and yelled at each other over IM lots. Finally I just called it quits and didn’t talk to him for a month and a half, then ever again after that.”

“Yeowch,” Kris murmured and rolled onto her side, putting her hands flat against my chest. “Crazy shit.”

“What about your break up?” I asked, resting my hand on her side now. “Was that messy?”

Kris nodded.

“Don’t want to talk about it?”

“Not yet.” She pushed at my chest, threatening to roll me off the bed. “Come on, we got studying to do for tomorrow.”

Codetta in the dominant

Kris and I pooled our resources. Kris had a joint and a half, I had half the bottle of Gin left, plus a beer. Our combined monetary assets were a handful of bills totaling fifteen dollars and seventy eight cents (three pennies courtesy of the bottom of Kris' backpack — I only ever kept quarters). By our powers combined, we were going to make the most of our Wednesday night. After all, I would drive Kris back down to her parents' the next day on my way to my Dad's.

"A walk is necessary," Kris announced, grandiose. "A journey, if you will."

"Would you perhaps be willing to call it a mighty journey?" I hazarded.

Kris rewarded me with my jacket, which I slipped into. The warmth of a shot of gin, 'preloading' she had called it, made the coat seem almost superfluous, but there was a fresh four inches of snow on the ground. "Well," she looked thoughtful. "I suppose Old Town could be considered mighty. Yes, then. A mighty journey."

I laughed and followed her out of the room. "What are we going to find in Old Town that we can get for fifteen and change?"

Kris slowed her strides somewhat to let me catch up as I worked on zipping up my jacket. "I dunno," she said cheerfully. "Something. Just want to get a last look at the place so I can go home and feel superior about Pearl Street."

"Aw, come on, Old Town's not that bad. They practically have the same shops on them, the only difference is that there are cars on College."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Guess we all gotta have goals."

Kris laughed and pinched me in the side, "Hey, at least I can get from one side of the street to the other without fearing for my life or waiting for twenty minutes."

"True, true."

"Girl's gotta be proud of where she comes from."

I shook my head, "You can't talk like that. You're a very, very white neo-hippie."

Kris pinched me again, harder this time. "Pot. Kettle. Black."

The banter continued as we made our way out of the dorm and up across campus. It was hard not to feel light and goofy. Gin notwithstanding, the lack of finals hanging over our heads was making us giddy, and the air being cold enough to burn the back of our throats did little to dampen our spirits. We just walked faster.

"Oh my God!" Kris dragged me to a stop only half a block north of campus. "Calzones!"

There was no arguing with calzones, so we dined on folded-up pizza and drinks, which left us with only a couple of dollars left. We huddled over our cardboard boxes of food, sitting around a polyurethane slab that appeared to have some wood in the middle, an adequate substitute for a table. We took turns kicking each other's shins beneath the table and giggling at each other

over the lids of the boxes which sat propped up in front of us like Battleship sets. Pepperoni had never tasted so good.

Emboldened by gin, full of cheese and starch, we made our way back out into the night and trudged back north, bumping into each other every now and then as our steps just happened to line up wrong (or right). We passed restaurants cheap and expensive, all starting to fill up with equally excited students. A block or two later and we started passing bars, already packed to the brim with the older students, just as excited and much drunker. Kris mimicked the various types of drunkards for me, and I laughed as she procured looks of disdain or amusement from passers by.

When that entertainment wore thin, we walked silently holding hands and weaving around countless others on the sidewalks.

Our warmth started to leak away by the time we reached the northern end of the street mall, and my patience with the crowds was beginning to wane. We turned west instead of directly south and walked a block in that direction before heading back to the campus. Someone had wisely planned a major railroad line down the middle of this one way street, as well as through campus, a fact which made me late for class on more than one occasion as I waited for a train to pass. Now, it just enforced a few minutes more of silence for Kris and I as a train blared, then rumbled past, a comet shaped noise trailing off as the train passed.

“So,” Kris said when we could speak again.

I nodded sagely, “So.”

Her grip on my hand tightened briefly before she tugged free and pocketed the hand. “What are we going to do with a month?”

“I’m not sure. Gonna try to do odd computer jobs for cash in the Springs and Steamboat, hopefully find a way between the two that has Boulder as a midpoint.”

Kris nodded and tucked her chin down so that she could push the lower half of her face into her scarf. “Can get us a few days together that way, I bet.”

“Yeah. Probably not as much as either of us were hoping for.”

She shook her head.

“You’re welcome to come visit either place, too,” I murmured, mind already tripping over the logistics of that. “Though that may be kind of weird.”

“Parents?”

I nodded, “Unfortunately.”

We walked quietly again, watching a horde of bicyclists swerve and waver down the street going the wrong way.

“What about a party?” I quipped.

“Hmm?”

“Well, I mean, we’ve got mutual friends. Eric and Erin. Jamen, maybe Joseph. Probably a couple of others. We could all get together somewhere, try to convince parents that we’re reasonable and logical enough to spend a weekend in a hotel at a ski resort or something. Make it into a party or something.”

Kris brightened up, “That could work, if we can somehow combine enough money for it.”

“Well,” I shrugged. “I’ve got a credit card I’ve used twice or so, I guess we could put it on that, so long as everyone pays us back. I think most people get money for Christmas, now that they’re in college. At least, that’s all I ask for.”

Kris laughed and goose-stepped to try to show me her shoes, “I need more of these, better for walking. S’what I asked for.”

I laughed, “Fair enough. Think your parents would go for that sort of thing?”

She shrugged, “My dad will be all gung-ho about it, and I think it’ll be pretty easy to convince my mom.”

“Cool, cool. My dad will be all for it, dunno about my mom. I can beg and beg, I suppose.”

“You’d better!” Kris laughed, elbowing me. “I want to see you in some context other than walking around Boulder.”

“Ah hell, even if it doesn’t pan out, I promise that’s not all we’ll do. We can go see movies and stuff. So long as they’re matinees.”

Kris rolled her eyes, “So we can catch all the field trips and old people.”

“I know! Won’t it be romantic?”

She laughed and leaned against me as we walked, two blocks to go until we got onto campus again. “So where were you thinking we could have this party thing?”

“Oh, I dunno. One of the less expensive ski areas, I guess, or close by. I know a few places in Steamboat, but that might be too far of a drive. I guess we could do it in other places, too, like Denver or wherever. Just get a hotel room somewhere.”

“Yeah. I mean, I didn’t expect that we’d be going out to a ski area to ski, really.” She shrugged, “I’ve only ever gone once or twice before. I sucked at it.”

I grinned, “Aw, it’d be fun. I can ski backwards. Could give you lessons skiing in front of you like that.”

“That sounds disgustingly cute. Not sure how I feel about it.”

“We all need somebody to lean on,” I warbled.

She snickered and freed her hand to hug onto my arm, giving it a squeeze. “Shut up. I hate that song.”

“Pff. Alright.”

“Well, anyway. I think the ski area would be better for partying if we decide to drink or anything, since Denver’s likely to be much stricter about that. Denver will be cheaper, though.”

“Yeah. And closer for more people.” I nodded, “But you’re right. I don’t think going to some hotel in Denver just to party would be that good of an idea, especially if we want to drink at all. I don’t think any of us would be over twenty-one. Besides, from watching the crowds at Steamboat, it seems like just the Thing You Do when you go to college; partying in a ski slope hotel.”

“Yeah, I remember my dad talking about it from his college days.”

The rest of the walk to my dorm was spent hashing out possible plans and discussing various results of such a party. We stomped the snow from our feet after crossing a field to more quickly get to the entrance to the building, finally shedding layers and relaxing once we got to the room. Thomas was gone for the time being, but his screen saver was on, indicating a temporary leave.

Kris dug her backpack from under the bed and pulled out the oboe reed case containing her minimal stash extracting the half-smoked joint from the tube and setting it delicately on the corner of my desk before returning the tube back to her bag. As if magically drawn by the scent of newly exposed pot, Thomas wafted back into the room with a beatific smile on his face and a campus paper tucked under his arm.

I burst out laughing, "I've never seen someone look so relieved."

"Hey man," he said dreamily. "Never underestimate the power of a good shit."

"You, my friend, are disgusting," Kris said, sticking her tongue out. Her expression immediately brightened as she gestured toward the half-joint on my desk, "Smoke?"

Thomas nodded sagely and set about fishing his towel out of the pile of clothes that served as his laundry basket. While the other two made preparations for the pot, I cracked some ice into my travel mug and added about a double shot of gin to that, setting the rest of the bottle out for those who wanted. Thusly situated, we settled in to party as quietly as possible.

"Fuckin' refried," Thomas sneered, but accepted Kris offer of letting him start the nub of a joint out, setting the sploof in his lap and the incense nearby as he drew the harsh smoke deep. Passed the marijuana on to Kris and sat still for a moment, face screwed up as if he was concentrating. His brows furrowed into a frown as he grabbed at the soda bottle he used as a sploof, coughing violently into it.

Kris raised her eyebrow and shrugged, taking her turn at the still smoldering pot, relighting it as she held it carefully, taking a large pull from it herself and passing it almost immediately on to me. I watched bemusedly as the ritual repeated itself with my girlfriend — the pained look and then the coughing into a bottle. The whole concept seemed decidedly silly.

As both of the others relaxed, I pondered the quarter of a joint left in my hand. Then, on a whim, snagged the lighter from the floor and joined in, figuring I'd give the stuff one more try.

My throat burned on contact with the harsh smoke, and I had to stifle the urge to swallow convulsively. My eyes watered and I swallowed a laugh as I passed the joint on to Thomas, who was chuckling at my expression. Kris laughed as she handed the soda bottle to me, which I, desiring only to fit in, coughed into explosively, sending up a cloud of weirdly scented smoke from the hole on the end of the bottle.

"Figured you'd come along?" Kris giggled.

"Why not?" My voice was hoarse and choked, and my throat felt like I had swallowed a thistle blossom. "Worth a try."

Thomas laughed and waved the smoking brand of his incense stick around the room briefly to douse us in the saccharine scent. "Thanks for smokin' me up with my own cheap-ass shit," he murmured, licking his fingers and pinching the ember on the stick of Nag Champa. "Y'all gonna get crunk, too? C'n I have some of that gin?"

I laughed at the wording and nodded, gesturing to the bottle with my head as I took a swallow of the liquor from my travel mug, the cold liquid soothing my scorched throat, only to introduce a different type of burn. I passed the cup on to Kris and scooted over next to her where she sat on the bed, "Thanks."

"Mm," she said, taking a few sips of the drink. "You're my boyfriend, I think I'm, like, required to share with you. Didn't know you'd be smoking up, though."

I nodded and shrugged, already feeling the fog roll into my thoughts and blanket them in mist. "Figured why not," I mumbled, leaning to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Cute," Thomas mumbled from across the room, spending the rest of his attention on trying to pour some of the gin into half a Mountain Dew he pulled from his backpack.

"Ain't it grand?" Kris giggled.

Thomas snorted.

"How come we never see you with anyone, anyway?" I managed to slur.

Thomas, drink held proudly in hand, recapped the gin and set it by the fridge, hidden in case someone opened the door. "Got a girl off campus. Says she don't want to come over here."

"Yeah?"

"Don't think she did so well in the dorms. Does her best to stay out of them now." He shrugged and pushed himself back onto his bed, only spilling a little of his drink onto his front. "I stay with her for the weekends. Gives you two room to, heh, do your thing, anyway."

My thoughts meandered dully around, and it took a few seconds to parse what he had said. I went to reply but found that I had been sitting with my mouth open, so I settled for just closing it and shrugging. Kris stuck her tongue out at Thomas and flopped back onto the bed, throwing a corner of my comforter over her face.

"What? S'not a problem," Thomas chortled. "You two are cute, in a kiddy sort of way."

"Thanks a lot," I managed before a giggle took over. Heh, 'kiddy', went my brain.

He saluted and set his drink down on his desk, levering himself up to take another toke from the remainder of Kris' joint, leaving it as little more than a nub afterwards. The coughing was repeated, abbreviated, and he set to puttering around the room. He picked up a DVD and set it to play on his computer, keeping the volume turned way down, then put his headphones in anyway and turned up his music. He told me that he was dead set on finding new soundtracks to movies, and this was how he went about it.

Feeling my eyes glazing and my eyelids drooping to half-mast, I finished the rest of my cup of gin. I refilled the travel mug with another double shot of liquor before setting it on the desk next to the head of the bed. Kris, meanwhile, cold as usual, pulled herself up into my bed and climbed in under the covers, hugging some of them to her front. She chuckled as she watched me struggle to untie my shoes, then helped to pull me up onto the bed with her after I got them

off. I climbed up over her only to flop down behind her. I rolled to face away from the wall, an effort on about the same scale as Boston's big dig, what with pot and alcohol both impairing, and tugged the covers over me so that I could nestle in behind Kris, head propped up so that I could watch Starship Troopers over her shoulder.

My thoughts were still meandering, but I was no longer in control of them. It left me feeling mute and stupid, unable to express or even experience any of the numerous ideas and emotions that swirled together in a vague blur inside my head. After a while, I gave up trying. The one clear thought left was that I was getting to spend the last night for more than a month with Kris here away from home. It was depressing at the same time as it was comforting, but that's about as far as I got in analysing it before giving up and hugging my arm around my girl.

* * *

Kris' parents, Kris, and I sat around their kitchen table drinking coffee later the next day. While certainly coherent enough to get us both down to Boulder, I couldn't shake a lingering tiredness from the night before, even with a pot of coffee.

"So how was moving out?" Kris' mom asked.

"Kinda dumb," Kris answered, hands wrapped around her coffee, which appeared to be more milk than coffee. "Just had to pack everything up and throw a bunch of food crap away since we were going to be gone so long. Found a bunch of cookies my roommate had sequestered in the fridge from the dining hall."

Her dad laughed and shook his head, "They make you move out for a month, huh? How do they deal with the out of state kids, or foreign kids?"

I piped up for that one, "I think they strongly encourage them to find someone in town willing to let them sleep on a couch for the month. A lot of the international kids are in Braiden, one of the dorms, though, and only one of the wings, so they may leave that one open."

He nodded and sipped at his coffee, leaning back in his chair and crossing his hands over his belly. "Sounds like a bunch of crap," he rumbled. "We spent all that time and money trying to get rid of you guys. We don't want you back."

We laughed and spent a few moments in silence before Kris' mom asked, "So, how are you two going to deal with this whole month apart?"

I felt my ears redden as I shrugged. I had been wondering if this question would come up ever since they had invited me in when I dropped Kris off. "My mom's in Steamboat and my dad's in Colorado Springs, I figure I can find a route between the two that includes Boulder as a stop..." I managed, looking more at my fingers holding my coffee cup than my girlfriend's parents.

Kris seemed just as embarrassed as I was, but after a few more moments of awkward silence, she added, "We were thinking... wondering if maybe we could meet up with a bunch of friends somewhere in the mountains. Get a hotel suite or a condo for a night or two..."

Watching for a reaction, I saw a hint of a smile creep onto the corners of Kris' father's mouth, and I wondered about the stories he had told Kris about his own college days. "Well, I suppose," he mumbled thoughtfully. "We'll have to think about it."

Kris glanced at me out of the corner of her eyes and gave a tiny shrug. Her father rumbled into laughter again, "Calm down, you two, nothing serious." He shook his head, "I don't know what you did, Cory, to make Kristal just as nervous as you."

I smiled faintly and took a sip of coffee, "It was an accident, I promise."

He laughed again and reached out to rub Kris' arm. She was almost beet red, but looked like she was stifling a smile, sticking her tongue out at her dad to cover it.

Kris' mom gave her father a Significant Look before nodding to me and smiling, "We'll talk about it, dear. I would think it'd be alright, so long as you all are safe. You are theoretically adults, after all."

Everyone chuckled and there was polite conversation until I realised that it was only dragging on until I finished my coffee and left. I drank more quickly and downed my coffee in the space of a few sentences, setting my mug down with finality. "Well, I suppose I better get going. Still a bit of a drive."

As if on my cue, everyone set down their coffee and nodded. We all stood up together as everyone rushed to escort me to the door. After a flurry of goodbyes at the door, Kris' parents ducked back inside to do whatever it is that parents do when their daughter's saying goodbye to her boyfriend.

"They're probably spying on us," Kris said, smiling faintly. "Shouldn't be too... uh, mushy."

I felt the ache in my chest as I realized how much I would miss her, but I smiled back and shook my head. "Just this," I hugged her to my chest and gave her a light kiss, little more than a prolonged peck on the lips.

She giggled bashfully and draped her hands over my shoulders, "I'll miss you, dork. Call, write, visit, whatever."

I nodded and grinned, "Will do. Month's a long time, after all. Hopefully things will work out with that party thing. Gonna get in touch with Erin and whomever else?"

"Yeah. You get Eric and Jamen and anyone else you think might be interested." She smiled and snuck in another kiss. "You probably should get going."

I nodded again and smiled, giving Kris a bit of a squeeze before stepping away from her. "Alright," I murmured, smiling as much as I could manage. "I'll talk to you soon."

Kris nodded and crossed her arms over her chest against the chill. I watched in my rear view mirror as she stood on the stoop and watched at least until I turned the corner.

Part II

Development

Juxtaposition

I wound up spending the first few days at my dad's since Colorado Springs seemed closer at the time than Steamboat. When I made it back up to the mountains again, I met my mom at a restaurant near our house rather than heading straight home.

"Thanks again for dinner," I said, our initial greetings out of the way once we had been seated.

"Of course, Cory," she smiled. "It's good to have you back home for a little bit."

I nodded and lied, "It's good to be back, too. Nice to see real snow again."

"Yeah? I'm getting a little tired of shoveling, myself."

"Jared helping out at all?"

"Yeah, we're alternating snowstorms for who shovels and who knocks down the snow and who does the driving for shopping."

"Well, makes sense, I guess. We've only gotten one or two big storms and a lot of little flurries out east. Never more than four inches."

"Yeah," she laughed. "That's not real snow at all."

I shook my head and sipped at my water. I had had to quell the urge to order a beer. Never mind my mom, I was still only eighteen with nineteen coming during the break. "So how have things been going other than that?"

She unfolded her napkin and laid her silverware out on the table, refolding the napkin, apparently found this disappointing enough to fold the napkin in a different way. She was stalling. Finally, "Jared lost his job."

"Huh? I thought he was feeling pretty secure, though!"

Mom wouldn't look me in the eye, "He was, but... oh, I don't know. You know the economy's a total mess right now."

"So I've read," I nodded, then shook my head. "Why didn't you call me?"

"It was just this last week, you had finals."

I frowned, but nodded.

"He didn't any real severance pay." She continued, still looking at everything on the table rather than me, "That kind of messed up our plans."

I nodded and took another sip of water to try to swallow the lump that was growing in my throat. I thought I saw where this was going, but didn't even want to think about it.

When I didn't reply, my mom went on. "Anyway, I'm going to have to help him pay for his daughter's tuition, as well as yours. Combined, we can afford another semester of both of you like this before savings run out."

That lump that had been forming in my throat started to taste of bile, which I tried to quench with water. At the rate I was going, I'd finish the glass before food got there. "Oh," is all I could muster. Then, "I'm sorry..."

Mom laughed and shook her head, finally looking back at me, smiling tiredly. "No, Cory. Don't be. I'm sure Jared will find another job soon."

I furrowed my brow and nodded.

“But can we ask you to try to get a job this next semester just in case?” she asked. “We’ll help you with scholarships when it comes time if it looks like a Jared won’t find something in time.”

“Yeah, that sounds fine, I guess.” I brightened, “I was thinking I’d hire myself out for computer help here and at my dad’s during break, just little things.”

Mom seemed to relax a little when I didn’t freak out and flip the table over at the news. “That sounds good. Jared and I will sound out among friends to see if any of them need any help. Do you have a brochure or website or something I can lead them to?”

“I’ll come up with something quick tonight. Web pages aren’t that hard.”

She nodded, “Sounds good. When should I let people know when you’re available?”

“I don’t know. I can be up here with a day’s notice in most cases if I’m at my dad’s or elsewhere.”

“Oh? Thinking of heading somewhere else over break?”

I toyed with the hem of the table cloth, but was rescued from answering for a few moments as our food was brought. Finally, I answered, “Well, a bunch of friends from the dorms were thinking of meeting up somewhere, renting a condo or hotel room for a night at some ski area just for fun.” I hastily added, “Dad’s cool with it, and might help with money if things work out with friends.”

Mom sat up straighter and finished the mouthful she was chewing. “Just... going and spending the night in some other mountain town? Why?”

I shrugged and shovelled some of my own food into my mouth. I had been looking forward to the curry, but with the way our conversation had been going, it tasted of very little. “Just getting together, rather than spending the whole month apart.”

She nodded a little and I could tell she was trying to hide a smile. “Kris going to be there?”

I smiled plainly and nodded, “I want to see her again, too, of course.”

“Well,” she said, taking a sip from her glass of wine. “I see no problem with it. Just wanted to make sure you were keeping up on your duties as boyfriend.”

I laughed with relief. “Oh. Thanks, I suppose.” Man, I thought. Moms are weird sometimes. I had thought she was going to just dismiss it straight out.

“In fact,” she was saying. “If you want to, maybe have the little party up here. I wouldn’t mind getting to meet Kris.”

“Well, to be honest, since everyone lives out east, we were thinking of somewhere like Loveland – Idaho Springs or Georgetown, I mean, there’s nothing really around Loveland — or, you know, Winter Park or some other place closer.”

Mom shrugged and nodded, pushing more of the yellow rice into her saag. “That makes sense. Still, if she ever wants to, she’s welcome to come visit you up here. I mean, heck, Chris visited, so why not Kris? Man, that’s goofy to say...”

I laughed and nodded, feeling better by the second. I savored a bite of curry and nodded, “Sounds weird to hear. Luckily they’re exactly the same and not just similar, so I don’t mix them up.”

She laughed and nodded. Most of the rest of our meal was spent in silence, my mom's addiction to spinach carrying her through just as my desire for good curry. I would have to find an Indian place in Fort Collins — I forgot how much I enjoyed the stuff.

With our food finished, only the milky chai left to finish, we were afforded more time to talk. "So how much do you think I should charge for computer stuff?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know," my mom shrugged. "Maybe something like twenty dollars an hour, minimum one hour? That sound fair?"

"I guess so." I thought for a few seconds, "I'd need about five hours to afford the trip. A hundred should cover my share of the room if we all chip in equally, then maybe some food as well."

"What all were you guys planning? Six people in one room? Maybe two beds and a pull out bed in the couch? I guess if you pay two hundred for one night... yeah, about forty dollars for the room, plus gas and food."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking. There's me and Kris, Erin and Eric, hopefully. Jamen, and maybe one other if we can get ahold of him."

"Jamen? That's a nice name," mom said. "I bet people call him 'Jammin' a lot, though. Or try to shorten it to 'Jay'."

I laughed and nodded, "That's a pretty sure fire way to get him really angry, really quick."

She laughed and sipped at her chai. "Do you like your name?"

I nodded, "It's alright, I suppose. Kris calls me 'Cor,' which I like. It means 'heart' in Italian or somesuch."

"Really? That's why we named you that, you know," she smiled. "Your dad said when you were born that you looked like you'd have a big heart. I suggested Cory, which he went along with on the stipulation that we never just call you 'Cor'. He said it was stupid and Cory was short enough."

"Wow," I laughed. "Hadn't heard that one before. Sounds like something my dad would do. Say something like that, then amend it so he didn't sound like a softie."

"Which he totally was, then," she grinned. "How's he doing, anyhow? I still miss him occasionally."

I nodded, "He's doing fine, I guess. Just working lots."

"How'd he take to you and Kris?"

"He was fine with it, I suppose. Pretty happy about the whole thing, guess he kinda wanted grandkids."

"Makes sense." Mom passed her credit card straight to the waitress before she could even hand her the bill. "I have to ask," she said, leaning in close and lowering her voice. "You two are being safe, or will be when you do anything?"

My ears went from zero to fuscina in nothing flat. I nodded quickly and hid my face behind my mug of tea.

"It's a mother's job to make her son blush." She sat back in her chair looking satisfied.

"Child abuse," I mumbled.

She laughed and nodded, "Just you try and report it. I really am happy for you two, by the way. I'm glad it seems to be working out."

I smiled, "Me too."

"It's still kind of surprising to think about. There was all that standard drama when coming out, it was strange to have to go through many of the same thoughts a second time."

I nodded, listening.

"Hell, I nearly asked you flat out if it was a phase again."

"Yeah, that was pretty strange. Kind of made me doubt myself."

She smiled and patted my hand across the table, "You know that wasn't my intention."

I nodded, "Of course. I just took it to heart is all. I think we wound up closer for my doubts, though."

"Good, good," Mom nodded. "That's what good relationships should do."

I smiled. "Good point."

The check came back and mom dashed off her signature. Slipping back into our jackets, we made our way back out into the cold, dry dark. Home didn't feel quiet as alien anymore.

* * *

Losing his job, it turned out, put Jared in a rather foul mood. I spent rather more time with my mom out on walks or locked in my room than I did just hanging around the house. It was better to face the slings and arrows of the internet alone than to take up arms against an angry stepfather, I had decided, and now that I was back, I really was glad to have mountains around me. I no longer felt quite as exposed as I had when moving out to the decidedly flatter Fort Collins. The hills piled up around our sheltered little town were comforting, and it felt as though the world was smaller than it really was. Even if that world was inhabited by angry step-parents and skiing crowds.

My mom's walks turned out to be a lot more fun than I had previously remembered, too. Despite it being winter, she would take the dogs out twice a day and each day pack the trail down a little more and walk a little further until the trail stretched out past our property and toward one of the hiking trails in the hills that was technically closed for the season. Of course, it would snow often and she would have to keep repacking the trail in order to make it useable once again, but the combined result was a semi-permanent trench that was visible even in fresh snow fall. The surroundings were beautiful, as always.

Mom and I caught up quickly until we were talking as we always had. We talked often of relationships. She asked about Kris quite a bit, and I did my best to dispell any of her remaining worries about us as a couple. I, meanwhile, started to gather that having Jared home all the time was doing little for their relationship. The edgier Jared got, the less my mom seemed to be able to deal with his presence.

My idea for computer help around town had mixed results. I had three clients in those first few days of working. One client paid sixty dollars for

three hours of my time in order to have me wire part of his house for a new computer he had purchased as an entertainment station. After wrestling with the operating system that had come on the computer, I managed to talk him into slimming it way down, though I didn't manage to get him to switch to a free system like I was using. One of the other two clients had some wireless conflicts with other devices in his house and the other's whole network had been brought down by a some virus brought back from college by their daughter. I had made my hundred dollars, but after that, I hadn't had any other hits.

The trip we planned had gone over well with Kris' parents, with the caveat that it be in the second week of January after new years; she had family visiting for Christmas and her parents were throwing a party for new years. This worked fine for me as well, what with no real plans except for Christmas, but others were not so lucky. Erin was not able to make it that week, and Joseph was out of town for all of break. That left me and Kris as well as Jamen and Eric. For money's sake, we had all agreed to try to come up with at least one more person that would be willing to join us for a night of mild partying. I had suggested Thomas and that had gone over well. Unfortunately, no one really had his contact information. I figured I would be able to look it up online. I supposed that CSU would have most of that information available somewhere. Least of all, I had one phone number of his from when I was sent information about my future roommate by the university.

Christmas eve had gone well enough at my mom's. Taking all the cards from relatives into account, I had received about four hundred dollars. I had only asked for cash, but my mom had given me a pair of pajama bottoms — red plaid — in order to sate her desire to give me a more concrete gift. Jared gave me a pound of coffee, which, while appreciated, was given grudgingly, and I figured he had actually purchased it for himself in some of his off time. He spent most of Christmas brooding and sipping spiked coffee. By the time dinner came around, he was all drowsy eyes and tired smiles, which was an improvement, all things considered.

My tallying of my trip carried me halfway to Granby, and I spent the next hour simply listening to music and watching the snow covered scenery roll past. Once I made it into the rather small town, I pulled out my directions again and spent a few moments lost in unfamiliar streets before I wound up on Highway 34. If I stayed on that, I would wind up in Loveland, just a few miles south of Fort Collins. Part of the reason for following a new path was to see if 34 would be about as fast in getting me to Fort Collins. Of course, the real reason was that it would lead me, after Estes Park, to Boulder, where I could visit Kris. Despite being Christmas day, I figured I would stop by for a few minutes and say hi, drop off the small gift I had gotten her while I was at it. We hadn't talked about gifts hardly at all, so I had tried to pick something that would be decorative at worst, useful at best, and picked up a small cast-iron tea-pot for her. I didn't trust myself to buy jewelry yet.

Driving along unfamiliar roads, along with the falling snow, did plenty to slow me down, and it took me a few seconds to realize that I was heading toward a national park. I frowned and took another glance at the map, keeping an eye

out for signs, or, and I crossed my fingers that I wouldn't come across any, National Parks huts. Of course, half an hour later found me stopped at a gate in the road with a sign saying that the park was closed for the day and that Trail Ridge Road, the road that wound through the park, would likely only open when weather permitted.

"Fuck, goddamn, shit-ass..." I cuss at the sign, sitting in my parked car for a few minutes, trying to think of an alternate route that would take me around the park. When nothing came to mind, I decided, to hell with it, I'd just take Highway 40 down. It was my usual route and would drop me onto I-70, which I would usually take to I-25, which would lead me to my Dad's.

As I got my car turned around and pointed back down towards Granby, I racked my brains to think of any other ways to get to Boulder that wouldn't have me getting to my dad's at midnight. I knew there was another state highway, 119, that ducked off I-70 before it made it to the eastern slope of the Rockies. That had the Peak to Peak Highway, I argued with myself. That would likely be slower than just leaving the mountains. There was bound to be a route north along the front range that didn't involve me driving all the way to I-25 just so that I could drive back west. Pushing my way up towards Winter Park — one of our prospective party locations — I weighed the importance of my gift for Kris to that of getting off the roads by dark.

Eventually, logic won out. Despite how much I wanted to see Kris, I knew that driving that much on Christmas day only to get to my dad's before Christmas day was technically over was not high on anyone's list of priorities. As the road shifted from following valleys to very sharp switchbacks, I turned down the music and focused on driving. Once I topped Berthoud pass, I decided that it'd probably be better to just give my girlfriend a call when I got a signal on my phone rather than worrying so much. I could wish her a merry Christmas and all that, promise her the gift, and let her know what I'd seen of Winter park when I drove through it.

Of course, it was nearing two by the time I finally got a signal worth using that looked like it would stick around for a little bit, so I made my call then.

"Hello?"

"Hey, merry Christmas," I said, smiling.

"Aw, you too, Cor," the voice on the other end said brightly.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything big."

"Nah," she said breathlessly. "Well, we're finishing up lunch, but when I said who was calling, they let me duck out to take it."

"Nice, nice." It was good to hear her voice again, if nothing else, I thought.

"How's the holiday treating you?"

"Oh, alright," she said vaguely. "Grandparents are here. They're pretty happy to hear that I seem to have found someone," she added quietly.

I laughed, "Well, that's good."

"I told them you were a good, upstanding, chivalrous, well dressed guy. I'm going to have to ask you to not visit so you don't prove me wrong."

"Hey! I'm upstanding! I think," I said, getting a laugh. "I was going to visit, actually, since I got you a little something, but it turns out to be pretty

difficult to get to Boulder from Steamboat. There's a big ass national park in the way."

"Aw, well, it's alright. What'd you get me?"

"Not telling, duh. Just a little thing."

She laughed, "Good, 'cause I didn't get you anything, dork."

"Pff, thanks a lot."

"Well, how's this? My mom and dad told me I could invite you to the New Years party they're having. They said you could stay over if you wanted."

"Really? That's awesome." I thought for a bit, then added, "You sure that wouldn't be weird at all, me staying over at your place?"

"Oh, it'll be plenty weird. But we're not in high school anymore, and besides, it will be good to see you, even though we're doing the party thing less than a week after."

"Well, alright. You a go on the party for sure?"

"Yeah, got some cash for Christmas which should be enough to cover my part of the deal."

"Cool, cool."

"I think I'm going to catch a ride with Eric, if that's alright. He lives up in Loveland, and I'm on the way for him."

"Aw, man... cheating on me with your roommate's boyfriend," I said in mock exasperation. "I knew it!"

She laughed, "Nah, Eric's Erin's toy. Got my own."

I grinned, "Damn straight."

"Cute. Anyway, I gotta get back to the table. Thanks for calling, Cor."

"Of course. Enjoy the rest of Christmas."

"You too, hon. Mwah," she said.

"Mwah back atcha. See ya, Kris."

"Bye, Cor."

She hung up, and I flipped my phone closed, tossing it into the passenger seat where it clunked against the box holding my gift to Kris. Well, I thought, at least I now had plans for New Years. I spent most of the rest of the trip down to my dad's focusing on that, picturing how sleeping over at Kris' place would be, about how limited by her parents' presence we would be. Oh well, I countered, at least I wouldn't be lonely this year.

* * *

Things were less hectic at my dad's, owing of course to the fact that no one had recently lost their job. Christmas dinner proved to be more turkey, which was excellent as usual, as well as a few beers on everyone's part. Thusly inebriated, my dad, Jenny, and I got into a discussion about relationships, particularly after I mentioned the strain I had felt between my mom and Jared. Both of them offered their support, which I knew I wouldn't pass on in order to avoid any awkwardness. Both also congratulated me on how well my relationship with Kris seemed to be going, and as my gift for Christmas, my dad gave me

another three hundred dollars in order to help out both with the trip later during break as well as for during the semester.

Figuring I would stay down in Colorado Springs until the New Years party, I typed up a flyer on a whim — “New computer? New troubles? Call for help!” was the gist of it — and posted it on a few lightpoles around the town where I figured i might get a few hits. As it turned out my services were indeed needed, and my current pricing undersold one or two other businesses that were trying to do the same thing, so I wound up making another hundred and eighty dollars, though none of the appointments lasted longer than an hour. I spent a bit of time stringing cable and setting up new wireless routers, but most of my time by far was spent introducing people to their new computers. I gained a new respect for the technophobes: I knew of no other class of people that was so obstinate against learning something new. I was continually confronted with furrowed brows and hesitant answers as I tried to explain the vagueries of email. This served to reaffirm my choice of study in college. If I had gotten stuck doing this for the rest of my life, I would’ve lost faith in humanity.

Money was money, though, and gas prices were on the climb, so those extra six hours of my time I was sure would prove to be quite useful in getting me around the state for fun and profit. Nearly a thousand dollars in my bank account was sure to help out during school, because I surely didn’t plan on spending all of that during break. Money in the bank certainly felt nice, though so I figured I would go ahead and follow advice and get a job during next semester if I was able, in order to start earning enough in order to support myself should funding get cut off or cut back sometime in the future.

Come New Years, though, I drove around and took down all of the signs. Not even twenty bucks an hour would keep me from the possibility of going to see Kris. I was starting to miss her dearly by this point, and the concept of the drive to Boulder in the snow was not going to stop me from making my way up there. I left the house by noon, figuring that would get me up north before the party started, just in case Kris and I wanted to do something before hand. If not, I could always putter around the town and check it out until the time when I could go and see her.

Leaving early turned out to be a good idea. I had apparently forgot that I wouldn’t be the only one driving to a New Years party on new years, because it seemed as though everyone who had a car was on the road and trying to go from one town to the next. I got stuck in traffic in Denver for a little while before I could make my way onto the turnpike between Denver and Boulder. More traffic just outside Boulder, of course. By the time I got to the city, I figured I’d only be ten minutes early, though, so I gave Kris a call to let her know that I would be there on time. She sounded breathless and excited.

By the time I parked, nearly half a block away from their house, it was dark and the party was apparently just about to start. I walked quickly up to the house and, before I even made it onto the lawn, the door opened and Kris, decked out in a button up black shirt and that same dress I had seen her in the first time I met her, bounded out to greet me with a hug.

“Oof, hey!” I laughed, “Hope I’m not under-dressed” I had neglected to ask,

and aimed for somewhere between casual and formal with khaki slacks slacks (Wal-Mart) and a blue-jean colored button up shirt (Kohl's)

"Nah, you look fine. Like a dork, but fine." She grinned and tugged at my fake-denim shirt.

"Gee, thanks a lot, dear," I rolled my eyes.

"Whatever, Cor," she said, leaning to kiss me on the cheek. "Come on, it's friggin' cold out here."

We piled into the warm, yellow light of the living room and shut the door behind us. I was greeted with a hug and a handshake, respectively, by Kris' mother and father, who introduced me to the other couple that had gotten there a little earlier.

"There's snacks and small food in the kitchen," Kris' mother was saying. "We invited quite a bit of people, so if you guys need to duck downstairs, feel free. We figured there'd be a few bored kids about, so we set the basement up as a retreat from boring adulthood."

I smiled and nodded, "Thank you, Mrs. Careen."

She smiled back, "I'd tell you to call me Kathy, dear, but I know you probably won't."

Her husband laughed and whacked me on the shoulder, "Well, Kristal did say that he was polite and chivalrous, didn't she?"

I felt my ears redden then arched to the side when Kris pinched at me. "Cory's nice, don't you two go about trying to ruin him," she said, standing with arms akimbo. "Better polite than Dante, right?"

Kathy rolled her eyes and walked back into the kitchen, shaking her head. "Ain't that the truth, kiddo," James said.

"Dante?" I had a guess, but I still felt decidedly out of the loop.

"Ex," Kris said, shaking her head before I could ask any further. "Come on," she instructed. "Lets go pick up some food. Mom's a good cook, and their friends all brought a bunch of food."

Indeed, Kris' mom was a very good cook. There was daal, an Indian lentil stew; spanikopetes, Greek spinach and cheese pastries; rolls; cookies with what looked to be jam spread in a pattern on top of them; and several different loaves of bread that all looked to be different flavors. I piled some of everything on my paper plate along with a styrofoam cup of the daal. The other couple had brought baked beans speckled with chunks of hotdogs, which I stayed away from at all costs.

Since everyone seemed to be gathering in the livingroom, Kris and I made our way back out there together and found ourselves a spot on the love seat, spending our time eating while the 'adults' made small talk and laughed at lame jokes about work and politics.

Finally, Kris turned more towards me and started up our own conversation. "So how was the last week? Only got to talk to you once."

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that," I said, washing down a bite of spanikopeta with a spoonful of lentils. "Family stuff and all. It was good. Made a bit more money, so I'm set for the rest of break and into the semester," I said carefully, unsure of weather I should bring up the trip bluntly.

Kris nodded, but her mom surprised us by asking, "What do you do for work over break?"

"Oh," I shrugged. "Fixing computers for people. I made almost two hundred in the days after Christmas just helping people set up their new computers."

"Are you studying computer science in school?" asked the husband of the couple whose names I couldn't remember.

I shook my head, "Music education. I decided I didn't like computers enough to make it my job."

A Significant Look passed between the couple, and the wife said, "The market for computers has stopped booming anyway, I think."

"Well, I don't know," began her husband. "Quantum's doing fine, seems like."

As the discussion continued between the couple, soon enveloping Kris parents, continued, it became clear that my becoming involved in the discussion was an anomaly best forgotten. I shrugged and smiled at Kris, who grinned and patted my knee. I'd never understand group dynamics, I thought.

"How 'bout your break?" I asked, reaching back to the original topic.

"Oh, it was fine." Kris sipped at a glass of water, food resting in her lap. "Was good to see the family again, I suppose. Kinda good to be back home, you know?"

I laughed and nodded, "Yeah, felt good to be back up in the mountains. They make the world seem a lot smaller, unlike the plains."

"Yeah. When I got back home, it almost felt like the Flatirons were going to tip over and crush me. Had a semester out with no real hills to speak of."

And so it continued. I told Kris about the troubles going on at my mom's while Kris related stories about her grand parents' visit as couples arrived, one or two with teens sulking behind them that brightened up as soon as they saw Kris. I was introduced to everyone in turn, and remembered no one's name. I was a little too focused on the pleasure of being introduced as Kris' boyfriend. Every time, it gave me a small twinge of pride.

Things finally started to pick up at around eight or nine that evening. There were, by my count, twenty three people at the party now, plus myself. Kitchen table had filled up with food and I did my duty of keeping it out of the mouths of starving children in Africa. Even one semester in college had taught me to never pass up free food.

The crowd had fractured into several small conversational groups. It seemed as though five or six people would gravitate towards one or two people that would spend the most time talking just so that they could nod their heads and smile at strategic moments. Unable to fathom the group dynamics involved, I turned into one of those head-nodders and just followed Kris around, getting into one or two small polite conversations about school or my relationship with Kris, but spending most of the time just hanging by her side, glass of juice in hand (while Kris had mentioned that we would get a glass of champagne at midnight, her parents were decidedly against underage drinking; I was starting to feel bad about drinking as much as I did at such an early age, anyway).

When the group seemed to reach the maximum amount of fracturing it could withstand, there was something of a unanimous, tacet decision amongst the younger demographic to migrate downstairs to the promised den.

A second round of introductions went around, now that we were a little more used to seeing each other around the house, and those in highschool still were not under the careful eye of their parents. There was more laughing, too, as we sat around, some on a futon couch and some on the floor, the TV on to some random movie more for the ambiance of a television than for us to watch.

“So, Dante?” I asked Kris when the younger group had started to fracture much as the older crowd had.

Kris shook her head and looked down at her drink, “It’s a long story.”

I checked my phone and shrugged, “Well, we have three hours until midnight, so time’s not an issue.” I hastened to add, “Of course, if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s okay. I was just curious.”

“No,” she wavered, then seemed to make up her mind. “Nah, now’s as good a time as any. We leaned back against the wall next to a book case where we sat on the floor, each with our legs stretched out in front of us and crossed at the ankles.

“This isn’t too public or anything, is it?” Everyone else seemed to be clustered in little groups of two and three near the TV, but I figured I’d ask for sanity’s sake.

Kris gave half a smile and shrugged, “Wouldn’t have started if it was. Anyway, yeah, Dante. I went out with him for a few years during high school. He was my first boyfriend. You’re my second, by the way. We hit it off pretty well when we met. He was sarcastic and funny, I was weird and funny. Neither of us were really all that popular. We hung out a lot in the halls in high school and people watched, even when we were supposed to be in class. Open campus and all that. And you should’ve seen our highschool. Not a right angle in sight, all these acute and obtuse things that were supposed to, like, break us out of the mold of thinking in the box or something. Of course, the walls were all bare concrete that had vertical stripes gouged in them. It made the place look like a prison. There were even rumors that the place was designed by a guy that designed nothing but prisons.

“Anyway, so yeah. We wound up hanging out more and more and then just sort started going out. It was kinda funny. We never talked about it or anything. We just sorta started going out without talking about it. My parents were okay with it, though I got the feeling they didn’t really like him. You saw the way my mom reacted earlier. They later told me they thought he was something of a deadbeat who didn’t seem to be going anywhere in life. I agree now. He works at some sandwich shop near the school. Never graduated. Got his GED a semester before he would’ve.

“I liked him, though, and he liked me. He was fun to talk to and make fun of all the stupid kids with. He let me try pot for the first time, and I had my first real drink with him, and tried cigarettes too, though I didn’t like either of those then. Still don’t like tobacco.” She cleared her throat and took a small swallow of her juice, “Anyway. Things were fun and all that, and we would lay

around outside or inside and just sort of talk. We talked a lot. Lot more than us, by the way. Trying to get you to talk more.”

I laughed and slipped my arm around her shoulders for a brief hug.

“We never had sex, though. We would talk about it and sometimes, I would feel him, you know... reacting to it when we would lay together, but I would chicken out every time. He would start touching me or something. My breasts or whatever, sometimes would try to put his hand down my pants, but I would always start feeling really dirty and stop him. He was always pretty cool with that, though.”

“Then, one day we ditched out of school early and went over to his place and got stoned. I mean, like, totally fucked up, completely wasted on his crazy strong weed he had. It knocked me down pretty bad. I could only lay on his bed and pet his cat while I stared at the ceiling, watching it sort of breathe at me. I felt like I couldn’t move. Dante lay with me and just kept kind of talking. I don’t remember what he said actually meaning anything, just sort of mumbling words. I remember it turned into kind of a drone and I felt like it was sort of lulling me somewhat.”

Her face turned red and her voice got quieter. “Then he just kinda... undressed me. I was wearing a skirt like this and a guy’s button up shirt. He just kinda sat up and took them off.” Her face went still and stony, reminding me of my talk with Jamen weeks ago. “I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t stop him. I couldn’t really think of anything to say, and it just kind of felt like I was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching. He just put a condom on and went at it, you know? I just felt like I was sitting there, watching him screw me, and I wasn’t moving at all. Just staring at the ceiling, you know?”

I held one of her hands in my own and she gave it a little squeeze in return. Her story had a rehearsed quality to it despite all the repetition, and I felt as though she had practiced it in order to tell it with the minimum of emotion required. All I could do was stare and wonder at the stillness of her voice. I would’ve been sobbing.

“So yeah. He finished and just went back to smoking. I slowly came down from being as high as I was. I just got dressed again and left. He was sitting on his computer and didn’t even really look up at me and I didn’t look at him. Just put myself back together and walked home.”

“Our relationship ended there. We just kind of stopped talking to each other from that point on. I didn’t tell anyone what had happened, and I assumed he didn’t either. I still wonder about that. I kind of get the feeling he was just as embarrassed about the whole thing as I was. I don’t think he was acting as himself. And before you say anything, I’m not making any excuses. I’ve watched the same thing happen twice before to my friends, and each time, they kept it all quiet like I did, but I could tell from the start that the boys had planned the whole thing out like that. They’d go and gloat about it to their friends and it’d turn into a big deal and the girl would be crying in the bathroom all the time.”

Kris faltered and shrugged, breaking her still mask and giving me another half smile, “That’s about it, I guess. Didn’t trust myself to have another boyfriend until I knew I was ready. And our first time... well, I was kinda

drunk, you know. It showed me that it could be nice, you know?"

All I could do was nod. My little spat with Chris seemed like so little now, after hearing that. I squeezed her hand in mine again and leaned over to kiss at her temple. I kept my face near hers and murmured to her the only thing I could think of saying, "Wow... thanks for trusting me enough to share..."

She laughed a little and tilted her head away from me as if I was tickling her ear with my breath. "I thought I might just make something up, but I figure if I can't trust you, I can't trust anyone." She finished her drink and set the cup aside so that she could lean in against me.

"You two are pretty cute together."

I blinked and looked up to see one of the other kids — Alan, I think his name was — grinning down at us from where he had just come down the stairs, lugging a plate of snacks. Kris smiled up at him bashfully and I couldn't think to do anything but copy her.

He laughed and shook his head sitting down on the office chair nearby, "Didn't know you had a boyfriend, Kris. Meet him at school?" He added quickly, "Sorry if I'm interrupting something, just let me know..."

Kris shook her head and sat up straight again, the both of us just sitting at the base of the wall like we had been. "You're fine. Yeah, met Cory in one of my classes."

Alan smiled and nodded, "You're up at CSU, right? How is it way up there?"

I shrugged, "It's alright. Flat."

He laughed. "How is it people wise? Pretty conservative?"

"Yeah," Kris said.

"Not as bad as Colorado Springs," I added. "Not by a long shot."

He nodded and took a drink, though the gesture looked staged, what with the cup in his left hand. I saw why pretty quickly. Showing the little rainbow chain-link bracelet around his wrist. Smooth, I thought.

I nodded towards his wrist, "Definitely more friendly than the Springs."

Alan blushed despite his little act, or perhaps as part of it. "Oh... yeah, I would hope so." He leaned in a little closer and lowered his voice somewhat, "You bi?"

I blinked. Gay-dar? I always thought it was a bit of a hoax, but every now and then someone would guess about me and I would question it. With both of them looking at me I shrugged, "I... well, I guess so."

"Kinda struck me as a gay guy," Alan said quietly.

"Thought I was until I met Kris..." I smiled slightly.

He nodded and sat back in his chair, picking at his food. He seemed to have regretted bringing the whole thing up, now for some reason. We sat in silence for a bit, while I thought about what I had done to give my sexuality away. I was hardly effeminate, and I hadn't done anything to give it away. Hell, the last guy I had looked at in any sort of attractive way was, I was ashamed to admit, Jamen.

"Funny how things work," Kris said after a bit. She looked thoughtful in a decidedly cold sort of way.

"Oh?" Alan looked taken aback.

“Just gender and all. Seems to mean an awful lot to people,” she said quietly.

“I didn’t mean...” he began. “No, I mean you guys really are cute together, didn’t mean to insult...”

I smiled in what I hoped was a disarming manner, “Well, I guess it does mean a lot to some people, but it’s not always the deciding factor. I’m happy with Kris, even though it was a big change.”

Both smiled at me and nodded. I relaxed a little, not realizing that I had been so tense to begin with. Man, I thought, even with people who didn’t know me, it was like coming out all over again.

“Gender means rather a lot to me,” Alan shrugged, blushing. “Don’t think I could go out with a girl... no offense or anything.”

Kris laughed, “None taken. I don’t think I could go out with a girl, either.”

“Don’t have to worry about losing you to your roommate, then,” I joked.

“God, no.” She laughed, “Erin’s got her boy, remember? Don’t think you have to worry about either of us.”

Alan grinned at the two of us. “So it’s pretty friendly up there and all?” he asked, trying to get back onto the topic he had started.

“Yeah, it’s fine. It’s more conservative, but it’s hard not be liberal on a college campus, know what I mean? There’s a pretty big community on campus there. They’ve got a student services office and everything.”

“Ah, alright,” he nodded. “I was thinking about going there for vet medicine, but was kinda worried.”

I shrugged, “Don’t think you need to be. It’s a good school and a cool place. Not that bad.”

The conversation wandered on from there, the three of us discussing the relative merits of mountains and plains, and how that changed things such as what type of bike you wanted to buy. It took me several minutes to realize that we were our own little group fractured away from the whole, that Kris and I had been for quite a while now.

I was just in the process of digging in my pocket for my phone when Kris’ dad called down the stairs, “Hey! Guys! Come on up! Ten minutes to go!”

Upstairs, they had a TV on a wheeled cart and had moved it to the little dining room nook. Almost all of the adults were gathered in the dining area, kitchen, and back end of the living room. It was hot and muggy up stairs from so many bodies and so much food heating the room up. The French doors had been opened and one or two adventurous people were even standing outside, cooling themselves off by standing in the three feet of cement free of snow left by the overhang of the roof. The cool air did feel pretty good, and I gravitated toward the open door with Kris in tow.

The TV was tuned to one of the local news stations so that we could watch the ball drop as, Kris’ mom explained to me after finding us, was a tradition in the family and had led to parties like this. I had never really paid attention to such things, so I stayed inside the house to watch. I was tall enough to see over most of the people milling in the dining room, and the TV was set back a little ways. Kris wandered over and leaned back against my front, so I hugged my arms around her middle as he watched the show and listened to the adults

chatter. I caught her parents smiling at us from across the room out of the corner of my eye. I smiled back sheepishly and they looked away, back at the TV. Kathy leaning over to whisper something in her husband's ear. A quick glance showed that they were holding hands.

Finally, with a minute left, Kris' father reached into the fridge and got out several bottles of champagne, and looking behind him, I saw a couple of rows of plastic champagne flutes lined up on the counter. The bottles were handed to what I assumed were a few trusted accomplices who all made their way outside.

"Ten! Nine! Eight!" we counted along with the TV. Those outside tore the foil off their individual bottles.

"Seven! Six! Five!" the wire cork baskets were untwisted with thumbs held over the corks. I held Kris a little tighter against my front.

"Four! Three! Two! One!" And finally, drowning out the sound of the corks popping, "Happy New Year!"

A cheer went up around the room and Kris twisted about in my arms and leaned up to give me a kiss. I returned it, keeping it chaste, conscious always of being surrounded by a good number of other people. Finally, she settled back onto her heels and draped her arms around my neck, "Here's to doing this again next year."

I smiled wide enough that I was sure she would call me a dork as always, but she just leaned in closer to rest her head on my shoulder while those in the room half sang, half mumbled Auld Lang Syne along with the music from the TV. We stayed like that for several minutes until Kris' mom tapped her on the shoulder to separate us while her father pressed a plastic glass of champagne into my left hand, shaking my right firmly.

He leaned in close to say quietly near my ear, "Thank you for making my daughter so happy."

I bowed my head in response and tried to hide behind my sparkling wine as I took a sip. He whacked me lightly on the shoulder and moved away through the crowd, his wife in tow.

We spent another hour or so upstairs, picking at the now cold food and talking with a few of the other guests. People seemed to be leaving in a steady stream, and by one o'clock, there were only three other guests left: a couple and their son, Alan. Kris' mother seemed to be anxious to see them off and hinted at such by starting to clean up around the house, but the father was in a discussion with James and didn't look to be wrapping it up. Kris, Alan, and I followed Kathy around, helping to clean up while Alan's mother stood next to her husband and occasionally shot us an apologetic look.

Finally, Alan's father seemed to get the hint, and within five minutes, gathered up his son and wife and found his way back to the car. The four of us remained alone in the living room, just standing and trying to digest the silence and emptiness of the house.

"Alright, guys," Kathy smiled to us after a bit. "Thank you for your help. I'm done in, though, we'll get the rest in the morning."

I nodded and suddenly felt awkward standing there with Kris and her parents, knowing that I was then supposed to sleep over but not knowing the pro-

to col. Was I supposed to follow Kris downstairs? If so, was that futon meant for me while Kris slept in her own bedroom? If I was to share a bed with her, was it meant to be chaste? Sleeping with our clothes on?

Everyone else seemed to pick up on the awkwardness as well, and Kris finally let out a nervous laugh, which we all followed along with.

"Well, sorry about that," Kris' mom said. "Cory, I can't ask you to sleep on the couch with anything, but, uh... there's an extra set of blankets and pillows in the linen closet in the downstairs bathroom..."

"Mom!" Kris was bright red and looked horrified.

"Yeesh, relax, Kristal," James laughed. "Someone had to broach it. Just don't stay up too late, alright? Keep it quiet down there."

"Dad!"

I had to remind myself to close my mouth. Everyone was flushed bright red and stood around for another moment before Kristal's parents left for their own bedroom, laughing and shaking their heads, talking amongst each other, something about growing up quickly.

"Jesus, parents," Kris said, sounding exasperated.

I could only nod in response.

"Well, whatever. They're weird. C'mon, Cor."

We made our way back downstairs and instead of turning toward the den kept going straight to a door that had been shut for most of the evening. Kris apologized preemptively for the mess and let me follow her in. The room was cozy and she still had a bunch packed away in boxes, but her bed was set up nicely with a green comforter and blue pillow cases. She sat on the edge and I stood leaning against the door jam, looking over the room.

Kris finally laughed and leaned forward to grab at my hand and pull me over to her. I stumbled and grinned down to her as she sat on the bed, towering over her. She hugged her arms around the backs of my thighs and rested her head against my belly. I brushed my fingers through her hair once or twice before leaning away from her, embarrassed at the beginnings of an erection.

I sat next to her on the bed and tugged my shoes off and set them next to the dresser before leaning in to kiss at her cheek. I smiled, "Awkward."

She laughed and wove her fingers with mine. "Yeah, I know. I keep feeling like they're going to like, barge in or that they've got a stethoscope on the floor above us. Oh well."

I nodded and sat still for a little, finally relaxing from the evening. "I'm friggin' beat from this evening. You cool with bed?"

Kris nodded and stood up to kick her own shoes off next to mine and to turn off the light. Left in the dark, the only light being the clock and a vague yellow glow coming from the window well of her one window, I lay back on her bed. My girlfriend's bed, I thought, amazed that this still was so surprising to me. I heard Kris shuffling about in the dark, apparently as blinded as I was. I felt her fingertips brush against my knee and giggled. The fingertips traveled quickly up my thigh and passed hesitantly over the crotch of my slacks before finding my stomach, then sliding off to the bed beside me. I felt that hand push down into the mattress as she put her weight into it. I let out a quiet grunt as

she lifted herself up onto the bed, swung one leg over mine, and straddled my hips.

I set my hands on her sides and felt her lean over until her nose bumped into my cheek. We shared another kiss before she pulled back. "Thank you for coming, Cor. And for listening. Earlier, I mean."

I nodded, nose brushing against her own. "Of course. Thanks for having me over."

She kissed me again and I rubbed my hands against her hips, not even trying to hide my body's reaction to hers. She shifted her weight all to one hand and slipped the other between us to fumble with my belt, getting it unbuckled and tugging it from around my waist.

Our paranoia about her parents lead to our moving slowly and quietly, which changed everything about the experience, made it all the more special. It was nearly three by the time we fell asleep, both still wearing our shirts in case one of her parents were to check in on us. More than the quiet sex or the fear of being caught, however, I remembered our last exchange before sleep.

"Cor, you know I really like you," she had murmured.

I nodded, "You know I like you too."

She chuckled quietly and was silent for a bit. Then, "Just wanted to say that."

"Mm."

"Not going to say 'I love you' until I know I mean it for real."

I had been on the verge of dozing off, but that woke me up. I nodded and hugged her a little tighter, her back against my front.

"I hope you understand."

"I do." I swallowed, thinking of how quickly I told Chris that I loved him. "I'll do the same."

She nodded, and we lay together. Finally, and I can't be sure she really said this because I was nearly asleep by that point, she whispered, "But the more I think about it, the better it gets."

* * *

I shared breakfast with the Careens on the first of the new year. Brunch, was more like it. Kathy cooked eggs to order and some turkey bacon, and there was plenty of coffee to go around. Kris and I then spent some time calling around to various places we thought the party might happen at. Results were mostly disappointing due to us waiting until so late a time in order to try to reserve a room. We lucked out, however, at a place in Winter Park. Someone, it seems, had to cancel their plans earlier that day and had left one suite open, which the lady was kind enough to book for us, even promising us a discount — very small, of course — for filling that spot on short notice and in the middle of the week. With today being Monday, we were able to book for Wednesday night the week after. Kris called the others involved and let them know the final date while I borrowed her computer to look up Thomas' number. When I got a hold

of him, he informed me that he was “bored out of his gourd” and would “totally dig” a trip up into the mountains.

With everything set for next week, I spent another hour or so canoodling with Kris in her room before the clock let me know that it was time to get going. I needed to get back down to Steamboat before it got dark, and I figured my welcome didn’t extend to another night at Kris’ place, despite her whining about getting me to stay. Since my mom’s was closer to Winter Park than my dad’s, it would be worth the tortuous drive to my mom’s straight from Boulder in order to save time in the long run. Especially since the place was registered in my name.

Kris and I held a prolonged goodbye in her room before both heading upstairs so that I could give my farewells to her parents. There was another kiss on the stoop before I made my way back to the car, watching her stand on the front step with her arms crossed against the chill in order to watch me until I turned onto the main drag of Boulder.

The main street led to the Boulder/Denver Turnpike, Highway 36, and out of town, but I skipped that turn and stayed on Broadway. It felt a little as though my chest held a spool of thread, and one end of it was attached to Kris; the further I drove from the city, the more I felt emotions unravelling in my chest, spinning into a dull ache of loneliness. By the time I was away from Boulder and following the winding road I had looked up along the front range of the mountains, I was actively pining. I rummaged around in the center console for my CDs and found the saddest one I could think of, Mozart’s Requiem, and slid it into the car’s radio. Sad music always cheered me up.

That winding, scant highway led me back on to I-70 which drove me deeper into the mountains and closer to home. By the time I left the small, Interstate-side towns behind and pushed on towards Highway 40, my route back home, I was no longer overcome with the sadder emotions, replaying the New Years party in my mind instead.

That whole incident with Alan had proved to be exceptionally weird. I thought back through my younger years, through the time that I had come out, to try and remember if there was any time that I had tried to be that manipulative in order to expose a part of myself to someone else. I had been dramatic at times, to be sure, resulting in some embarrassing moments of anticlimax, as I’m sure I had caused for Alan, but hardly to the extent of what he had done. Everything about it had seemed so rehearsed, as if he had been planning it all from the point he had decided that I was gay.

That was another problem with the whole thing. It was decidedly difficult for me to not just chalk things up to gaydar, because I was fairly sure that I didn’t do anything stereotypically gay, certainly nothing overt, to be sure. I dressed like an idiot, talked like any other band dork, and was awkward around everyone, not just guys or girls. I felt that I was as affectionate with Kris in public as I had been with Chris or any other boyfriend. Moreso even, due to the lack of stigma that went with homosexuality. Gaydar, though, was something I never trusted. It wasn’t just that I didn’t have anything resembling it myself, so much as there was no logical basis for it when things weren’t completely obvious,

especially once mainstream media had deemed it just fine to be ‘metrosexual’.

I shook my head and drove on. I thought instead of Kris’ story of Dante. Anger sank into the pit of my stomach and I gripped the steering wheel tighter. It was hard to take what Kris had said about what had happened afterwards into account. I didn’t care if the kid was remorseful or if Kris forgave him. Everything else just spelled date rape to me. I even began to twist the story in my mind, wondering if the pot that she had smoked with him had been laced with anything.

Thoughts of Dante led to worries about myself and the fact that I had never really asked Kris if she had wanted to the four times we had had sex. Of course, the first time had been at her encouragement, but still, I worried. The comment about Dante wearing a condom had struck a nerve as well, and I began to worry about possibly getting Kris pregnant. Kids were not on my list of things to have any time soon, and I had always pictured adopting rather than fathering. And here we had never once been safe beyond Kris taking birth control pills. I added that to my list of things to bring up with her, along with just talking about sex in general. We had only talked about it once or twice and always right after. Since things had progressed to that point, it seemed rather strange I didn’t even know what she liked, when it came to affection and intercourse.

I had enjoyed myself during those four times, to be sure. When I asked myself the questions I told myself I would ask Kris, the answers were strangely hard to come by. Categorizing our experiences to date, I added items to lists of like and dislike: I disliked feeling like I was crushing someone smaller than myself, making missionary position rather strange; I liked how things went last night, much slower than before; I disliked the awkward sounds I made when I breathed heavily; I liked how much softer Kris was than myself, or any guy I had been with for that matter.

Boys, I chided myself. Always thinking about sex.

Of course, I gave in and fantasized about future encounters most of the rest of the way back to Steamboat.

Mom and Jared both greeted me at the door and wished me a happy New Year. I gave my mom a hug and shook Jared’s hand, greeting them both.

“So, Cory, how was the party?” Jared asked once we made our way in to the kitchen, dinner already laid out, thankfully still warm.

“Oh, it was alright,” I shrugged, slipping into my usual chair. “Kris’ mom is a pretty good cook.”

“What all did she make?” asked my mom.

I served myself a heap of spinach, rice, and feta cheese and thought back, “Little Greek spinach pies, daal... uh, I dunno, lots of stuff.”

“And it wasn’t weird, you staying over at her parents’ house?” Jared never was one for small talk. Mom gave him a dirty look.

“No,” I shook my head. “Well, I mean, of course it was, but normally so. It was weird when Chris stayed over here, too, remember?”

Jared nodded, but pressed on, “Did you sleep on a couch or something?”

“Jared!” mom scolded.

I felt my ears redden. I hadn't realized it had been that big of a deal. Dad was okay with it and Kris' parents were fine also, even joking about it before we went to bed. "No, we shared her bed."

Jared looked about to ask more probing questions, but, seeing my mom's glare, thought better and there was a moment of silence as he mentally reworded the query. "And everything went fine?"

More than fine, I thought. "Of course. I said, no weirdness out of the norm," is what I said instead.

Jared's searching look asked if I had fucked her, if we had been safe, if he would have to help pay for a step-grand-child, but nothing was voiced. Instead he served himself and we ate in silence.

Finally, I spoke up, "So we got the trip all squared away. Going to Winter Park next Thursday."

"Should be fun," mom said cheerily.

Jared grunted.

I wondered if staying up here was a mistake.

"You'll be safe out there alone, you think?" my step-dad asked after a moment.

"Yeah, it'll be fine. There'll be five of us in all. Kris, me, my roommate, and two other guys from my hall. They're all pretty cool."

"Good," mom replied, scooping the last of her food onto her fork, adding before she took the bite. "No drinking or anything stupid like that?"

I laughed and shook my head. "No one's old enough to get alcohol, mom," I replied, lying curtly. "And even if they were, I don't think any of us are into that. Maybe Thomas, but I think he'd rather smoke pot."

"Would you?" Jared asked. "I did once or twice in school."

I shook my head, answering truthfully enough, "Doesn't really interest me, honestly."

Mom nodded approvingly.

I changed the subject eagerly. "Think anyone else around town would need any computer help? At dad's I put up flyers offering support for computers people had gotten for Christmas."

"That's pretty good idea," Jared mumbled. "Probably get a few bites doing that. Kinda makes me wish I knew more about computers."

"Still no luck on the search, then?"

He shook his head. "No one's really hiring around Christmas, but I expect things will start cropping up in the next few weeks. New tax year for lots of people, and all."

I nodded and finished off my rice. "Well, wish you the best of luck. Hopefully I can find something up near school, myself."

Jared nodded and seemed to lose himself in thought.

As I cleared the plates and helped my mom with dinner, I wondered about him. He had been unabashedly supportive of me going out with a girl, which got on my nerves and seemed to affect my mom as well. That all seemed to have shifted in the past few weeks, assuming it wasn't all my imagination. I sighed and scrubbed at the rice pan. This relationship must look like trouble to

everyone around me, judging by the way they were reacting. I was left puzzled by the fact that Kris and I were the only two that seemed to take the whole thing in stride.

I shook my head. Too much time spent thinking about the doubts of others and I would start doubting, myself.

Sequence

It turned out that there were still quite a few people flumoxed by those newfangled computer things that people seemed to go on about. Purchasing one had proved to be quite an adventure and, despite the promises made by salesmen at every location, they weren't quite as easy to set up as anticipated.

Another hundred dollars found its way into my pocket by means of five hour long lessons given across the town. One person had already called the service branch of a well known store in order to have them come out to her house to fix her computer, but they had just messed it up further. On the plus side, the machine was still under warranty and the visit didn't cost anything. Unfortunately, that warranty carried little weight after that visit, and so I had been called.

Despite the money I had made, I was under no illusions of continuing to make it at the same pace. Most all of that cash had come straight from people who needed help with their new Christmas presents, and I knew such things would taper off. I was honestly surprised to make as much as I did. Of course, tempting as the money was, I felt that I would likely hang myself before I went into tech support as a profession.

And I still had a week to go until the party.

I decided I'd rather spend my time relaxing for the rest of the break and drove around town tearing down all of the signs I had posted and finally stopping off at the bank to deposit the cash into my checking account. Debit cards were much easier than a fist full of twenties, at least for myself.

Once home, of course, I was confronted with Jared. He seemed to alternate between watching TV, ripping through the classifieds of various newspapers, and surfing the internet. Sometimes, of course, I'd find him watching TV shows on the internet with a paper strewn over his keyboard and desk. While I applauded him on his efficiency, he was decidedly uncomfortable to be around, so after feeding the dogs, I slipped back into my room and sprawled next to the computer on the floor, shaking the mouse and waiting for the aged CRT to click to life.

I took down my away status on both IRC and my instant messenger client, taking a few minutes to scroll through backlogged messages on the former and seeing who was online in the latter. It was enough to make me doubt my choice of leaving the rest of my break open, and I cursed my relatively remote location in keeping me from possible meetups and all sorts of action.

Resigned to watching music videos on the internet and reading webpage after countless webpage, I pulled my pillow and blanket down from the bed to make something of a nest for myself there on the floor.

My third music video was interrupted by a an instant message popping up and covering a portion of the singer's face. I reached for the mouse in my usual reaction to minimize the window to allow me to finish the video but hesitated when I skimmed over the message.

aramanth: Hey, Cory. Jamen.

I blinked away boredom and couldn't help but smile. I let the video continue in the background, moving the conversation window over to the side so that I could keep an eye on both.

CoryroC: Oh, hey! What's up?

aramanth: Not a whole lot. Just being lazy, I guess. You?

CoryroC: About the same.

CoryroC: How'd you get my s/n?

aramanth: It's on facebook, duh :oP

CoryroC: Crap. Almost forgot I was on that.

aramanth: *laughs*

aramanth: Excited about the trip?

CoryroC: Thrilled. Gonna be a boring wait until then, for sure.

aramanth: I know what you mean. Alamosa's not really a very thrilling town.

CoryroC: Yeah, neither is Steamboat, especially when it's so expensive to ski.

aramanth: *laughs* Yeah.

aramanth: So anyway, I figured I'd message you to ask a favor.

CoryroC: Sure, anything.

aramanth: I don't know if I'll have enough to both drive diagonally across the state and pay for the room. Think you could help out some.

CoryroC: Oh! Of course.

CoryroC: What would work best?

aramanth: Well, you live in the Springs, right?

CoryroC: Some of the time yeah. In Steamboat now.

aramanth: Oh.

CoryroC: Why, what were you thinking?

aramanth: *shrugs* Well, I was hoping I could just drive over to the Springs and catch a ride with you from there to Winter Park.

CoryroC: Oh, that should be fine. I can head down to my dad's on Monday or something, and just spend some time there until you come over.

aramanth: You sure that's alright?

CoryroC: Of course :) I'm pretty eager to get out of this place, anyway. Step-dad's driving me nuts.

aramanth: You're telling me. I need to get away from my family something awful.

CoryroC: Its enough to make one want to go back to school sooner.

aramanth: No kidding.

CoryroC: So how've you been, anyway?

aramanth: Well, aside from parents, alright. Bored. Couldn't get any seasonal job so I've just been sitting around on the internet mostly. My parents think I'm researching a project for next semester.

CoryroC: I assume you're not? :P

aramanth: Hell no. Give myself more work? That goes counter to the artist's creed!

CoryroC: Haha, of course.
aramanth: Besides, it's better that they think that than find out I'm talking to others.
CoryroC: Not too keen on the internet, are they?
aramanth: No, definitely not.
aramanth: They're afraid I'll meet someone who will turn out to be a rapist or something.
CoryroC: Oh. Yeah, had to break my parents of that assumption pretty early.
aramanth: I wish I could, man.
CoryroC: Good thing I'm not a rapist, then.
aramanth: *laughs* No, I didn't figure you to be one.
CoryroC: Good :P
aramanth: You're gay, though, so it wouldn't make a difference to my parents.
CoryroC: Aw. I guess I'm bi, but I guess that wouldn't matter, would it?
aramanth: Oh yeah. Still just as bad. Worse, 'cause they think that means you're just a gay guy who rapes girls too.
CoryroC: Jesus..
aramanth: Sorry :oP Probably more than you really needed to know.
CoryroC: No, it's alright. I just didn't know.
CoryroC: Don't know anything about your life at home, so it's kind of interesting to hear if nothing else.
aramanth: *nods*
CoryroC: So your parents are really that homophobic?
aramanth: Yeah. Makes me wish I was back up at school.
CoryroC: So, uh.. no offense or anything, but are you gay?
aramanth: *nods*
CoryroC: Oh, alright.
aramanth: Sorry. I kind of led the discussion there.
CoryroC: Hmm?
aramanth: Well, it's easier to just answer truthfully when someone asks than to come out.
CoryroC: Oh.
CoryroC: Yeah, I know how it goes.
CoryroC: So do your parents know, then?
aramanth: They did.
aramanth: I told them it was just a phase.
CoryroC: Ah, alright. So they think you're straight now, then?
aramanth: *nods* Better that than the alternative with some people.
CoryroC: I guess, yeah.
aramanth: I envy you with having found Kris.
CoryroC: Well
CoryroC: I wasn't really planning on it.
CoryroC: Besides, my situation at home is quite a bit different from yours.
aramanth: Yeah. Parents a little more cool with it.

CoryroC: Mom and dad were, yeah. Step-dad not so much.

aramanth: Ah.

CoryroC: Yeah, he was pretty happy about Kris.

aramanth: How did your parents deal, then?

CoryroC: Heh, strange. It was almost like coming out all over again.

aramanth: How so?

CoryroC: My mom worried that.. uh.. that it was just a phase from me moving to school.

aramanth: Oh, heh.

aramanth: And your dad?

CoryroC: It was almost the same as when I came out.

CoryroC: Though I think he was a little excited about possibly having grand children.

aramanth: Yeah.

aramanth: That was a big problem with my parents. Any relationship that didn't lead to kids was just wrong.

CoryroC: I'm sorry, man :/

aramanth: Nah, it's cool. that's why I went to the other side of the state for school.

aramanth: Anyway, I really am happy for you and Kris.

CoryroC: Thanks :)

aramanth: It was kind of strange for me to hear that you could be going out with a girl.

CoryroC: How so?

CoryroC: Have anything to do with what we talked about earlier in the semester?

aramanth: *nods*

aramanth: Sorry again about that.

CoryroC: No problem.

aramanth: So the whole story is that my parents found his phone number and looked it up, then called his parents to tell his.

CoryroC: Jesus..

aramanth: Yeah..

aramanth: Then he got stuck in aversion therapy.

aramanth: My parents were going to do the same, but I told them it was only a phase and found a girl willing to be a cover-up girlfriend for me.

CoryroC: Ack, was wondering who you were talking about before.

CoryroC: That's pretty crazy :/ They left you alone after that?

aramanth: For the most part, yeah. They watched me pretty close until college.

CoryroC: They're not watching now, are they?

aramanth: No, they suck at computers, and are out for the day anyway.

aramanth: Besides, they're more worried about my sister now. She's starting to go after boys now, and they're worried she'll have premarital sex or something.

CoryroC: So they're pretty christian?

aramanth: Yeah. I was for a while. Kind of stopped believing when I was twelve or so.

aramanth: Kept going to church because I had no choice with parents and such. Didn't make me any more of a believer.

CoryroC: I suppose it wouldn't.

CoryroC: Both my parents are pretty liberal. We went to church for easter twice before they decided it wasn't worth it for me.

CoryroC: Then they got divorced and gave up on the religion thing.

aramanth: *nods*

aramanth: It's always strange to hear about families different from my own.

CoryroC: Yeah, sounds like it was pretty rough for you.

aramanth: I guess.

aramanth: I love my parents, and they love me. They just have different ideas for how I should live my life.

CoryroC: Well, I think you turned out pretty nice :)

aramanth: *laughs* Thanks :o)

CoryroC: So how'd you convince them to let you go to the party?

aramanth: Told them the truth.

aramanth: Working with my partner on this art project.

aramanth: :o)

CoryroC: Heheh, awesome :)

aramanth: Anyway, they'll probably be back pretty soon, so I should get going.

CoryroC: Alright. Hey, it was good to talk to you.

aramanth: Definitely. Don't think I could've said any of that to your face.

CoryroC: Well, I'm glad you did, even if online.

aramanth: Me too :o)

aramanth: See ya, man.

CoryroC: See ya.

The music video was long stopped so, as Jamen's icon flicked to grey as he logged off, I lingered long enough only to switch to the next video in line before rolling onto my back in my little next. Nothing like having to reevaluate everything you knew about one of your friends, I thought. Made me realize just how good I had it.

* * *

I decided I would stay up in Steamboat until Sunday in order to spend a bit more time with my mom and Jared, though the latter I tried to avoid for the most part. It did, however, give me a chance to head out with my mom on another few of her forays out with the dogs. The mountains were comforting, and the more I thought, the more I had to share with my mom who, I felt, was much easier to talk to than many others in my life. She seemed eager to get out of the house, as well.

So Saturday came, and found us following the dogs as they dolphined through the snow, leaping up above it to either side of the trail rather than plow through it. They would occasionally get tired and find their way back onto the packed down patches to trot along with us, but as soon as some noise, real or imagined, made its way through the trees, they were back off into the deeps, leaping through the heavy powder. Less adventurous, my mom and I stuck with the trail and occasionally called after the dogs when they made their way out of site.

“Mom,” I asked as we watched the dogs forge ahead. “What do you think of me being bi?”

“Oh, I don’t mind. You’re the same person, after all,” she shrugged. “Why, what’s up?”

“Oh, just thinking,” I trailed off, waiting until we wrangled the dogs back in to continue. “It just feels like I’m coming out all over again, is all.”

“How so?”

“Well, I’m certainly having more conversations and stressing out more about this than I ever did when I came out in the first place.” I thought for a second before amending that, “Well, maybe not more stress. Still, a lot.”

Mom laughed, “Yeah, you stressed yourself out pretty good about that. I can see what you mean, though. We all seemed to worry a lot about you and Kris.”

“Had to work to keep myself from worrying, too,” I added. “Just didn’t want to scare myself away from the relationship.”

“Well, yeah,” she trailed off. “That was partly intentional, I guess. However subconsciously.”

“Huh? How so?”

“Well, at least on my part. I just felt you were rushing into things, is all, and I wanted you to think about that and make sure you weren’t.”

I held my tongue for a few steps, counting to ten in my head. By the count of fifteen or sixteen, I calmed down. “Always looking out for me,” I joked. Better that than taking it the wrong way.

She nodded and we walked alongside the two panting dogs to the edge of the property. Finally, standing near the fence, she turned to me. “So do you have something else worrying you? Besides the second coming out and all.”

I shrugged and racked my brain for the root of what was really worrying me. “Well, my friend Jamen came out to me in part because of it.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Kinda made me realize how lucky I had it when I came out. His parents didn’t do so well,” I continued on with the story he had told me the night before.

“Ouch,” mom winced.

“Yeah. Now I almost feel like I’m squandering my relatively positive experience by dating a girl. I don’t think he really believes that but, well, it’s hard not to feel bad.”

We turned back toward the house and called the dogs with us, walking slowly as my mom replied, “Yeah, I can see how that would be a little strange from

the other point of view. Do you think that maybe he likes or something that you've had your bit of drama with him?"

"I dunno. It's possible, I guess. We talked a little but to be honest, haven't done a whole lot of hanging out during the semester. I don't want to just confront him on it and make things all weird by asking, but who knows? I guess we'll see how things work out."

She smiled and nodded, then, "Just don't... lead him on or anything. I don't want to see you hurt by weirdness, but I'd rather you not hurt anyone else, while you're at it."

I shook my head violently. "Of course not. I'm a little paranoid about hurting others, I think."

She nodded and added, "Better to err on the side of caution there. You can really mess a person up for life, hurting them like that."

We walked the rest of the way to the house in silence, each with our own thoughts. Me, I was wondering why my mom had ended the conversation like that. It's the fate of ever child of divorced parents to wonder about the causes of their separation.

* * *

By Monday evening, I was itching to get out from under my parents. It wasn't that I was particularly tired of being back home or even that I wanted to get back to school. Simply put, so much of the rest of my break revolved around the planned trip that everything else just seemed like so much of a waste. Without the briefly interesting computer work, I was left with little to do other than sit around online or try to find something to do in a town I didn't even know all that well.

Finally, I gave up and just grabbed my cell phone and stuffed it in my pocket, shrugging my jacket on and slipping out of the apartment while my dad and his girlfriend watched TV after dinner. Being still the heart of winter, it was already long past sunset and the streetlamps lit the block around the apartment complex in a dull yellow. I walked down the short canyon of the sidewalk, snow drifted up to either side from the day's plowing. The snow had stopped, but the sky was still a dark gray, lit from beneath by the sulfurous lamps.

I circled the block first, just to stretch my legs, then headed out west toward the mountains, figuring that if I walked enough to wear myself out, I'd appreciate walking downhill back to the apartment rather than climbing up to it. At least it was a quiet evening, I thought. The streets were empty and the only sound was a slight wind higher up and the occasional rush of a passing car blocks away.

I was startled from my thoughts by a buzzing in my pocket, my phone vibrating from a call. Still walking, I pulled the brick phone from my pocket and peered at the backlit screen. Kris.

"Hey!"

"What's up, Cor?" she asked, sounding excited.

"Not much, just out for a walk."

"Now? It's way dark and cold, though."

“Yeah,” I shrugged despite being on the phone. “I needed to get out, you know? Sick of parents, sick of being at home with nothing to do.”

“Oh, yeah, guess I can understand that.”

“Yeah. So what’s up?” I asked.

“Jamen’s gay!” she blurted.

I laughed and shook my head, “I know. What brought that on?”

“Oh,” she sounded disappointed, her surprise ruined. “Just got done talking to him online, he told me about it.”

“Good on him,” I replied. “Takes a lot to come out.”

“Yeah, especially with his family.”

“Oh, he told you that, too? That’s friggin’ crazy.”

“Uh-huh.” She laughed a little, “He said you have it easy, liking a girl for real and not just to cover up being gay.”

I felt my cheeks redden from more than just the cold. “Yeah. I feel kind of bad, now. He definitely had it lots harder than I did.”

“Yeah? Why do you feel bad, though?”

“Well,” I stumbled over my words. “It just feels like it’s a pretty big deal for me to be going through all this weird stuff, like coming out all over again, when he had to go through all that.”

“Mm. Makes sense, I guess.”

“What do you think about all of it? I mean, me, and all...” God, I sounded dumb.

“Being gay and with me? Oh, I don’t know. Sometimes I worry a lot about us, but it seems like every time I do, we have a real good time with each other and that goes away for a while.”

“Yeah, you and me both,” I laughed.

“How so?” Kris asked, sounding concerned.

“Well, I worry sometimes, too.”

“What about?”

“That I’m... I don’t know, fooling myself. That I’m really still gay, but just kind of making myself act straight for a while.”

“Oh.” I could hear the frown.

I hastened to add, “Of course, like you said, then we hang out or... you know, get together and that all kind of goes away for a while.”

“Well, as long as that’s the case,” she laughed.

“Of course. It’s like if I spend a bunch of time alone, then I start having my doubts.” I smiled, “I guess that means we’ll just have to spend more time together.”

I heard Kris giggle, then, “You got it, Cor.”

I grinned. “Hope I’m not making things awkward by talking about that.”

“Nah,” she replied. “I told you to, remember? It is a little weird hearing that you’re still doubting things, but I guess that’s something I should know.”

“Oh, alright. I don’t want to seem like I’m just experimenting with you or anything. I’m not, you know...”

She laughed and I heard what sounded like pots being moved around behind her, "I know, I know. Anyway, look, I gotta get going for dinner. Can I catch up with you later?"

"Sure thing. I'll see you online or call you before the trip, and we can make sure things go alright."

"Cool. See ya later, Cor."

"Mwah," I offered, giggling.

"You're such a dork, jeez," her voice trailed off as, I supposed, she pulled the phone away then I heard the click of disconnection.

I made sure she had hung up before slipping the phone back into my pocket and continuing up west. With the clouds lit from beneath as they were, the mountains appeared as a raggedly cut border leading to the real night: pitch black with constellations of lights from the wealthier people who lived on the hills. I shook my head and walked, mind wandering back over my words as I searched for anything that might've come out wrong. I had always heard you were supposed to turn things over in your mind seven times before you spoke, but I never could manage that.

I had gotten the feeling that admitting to Kris that I still had my doubts about my sexuality hadn't exactly gone over well. Of course, in hind-sight I could see why. I don't think anyone enjoyed being told by a loved one that they weren't the gender that they had expected. I supposed I had just told Kris that. Wondering if I was really still gay in the middle of a straight relationship struck me as a not very healthy way to run things.

I was still warmed by the fact that I had talked with Kris, though, and I realized I still did like her an awful lot. It was hard for me to concentrate too much on any of the troubles I had introduced in the relationship when I was busy focusing on how nice it was to be in that relationship in the first place. With that, I hunched shoulders against the building wind and turned around for the easy walk back home.

Strange loops in modulation

Jamen showed up at my dad's apartment fairly early that morning. We had planned on the drive taking quite a while, and since the room was registered in my name, I wanted to make sure I didn't leave anyone waiting just because I had gotten bogged down in traffic somewhere between the Springs and Denver. So I wound up waking up at around seven thirty that morning and puttered around, useless until I had my two cups of coffee, and by the time Jamen knocked an hour later, I was packed, showered, and ready to go.

My dad was up, but his girlfriend was still asleep, so he greeted my friend and offered him a cup of coffee as well — such addictions ran in the family — before we made our way out into the cold. I was lugging a duffel filled half way with a set of clothes, a pair of swim trunks in case there was a hot tub, and some additional snow gear; my skis and a spare pair of snow blades were in the car just in case anyone else decided they wanted to go skiing as well. Jamen got to carry the cooler, another styrofoam deal, that my dad had filled. There was a bag of ice, a whole chicken, a bag of spices and salt for the chicken, a handful of potatoes, a quart of milk, and a can of frozen juice in the cooler. Materials enough for me to cook dinner for the night we would be up there. Taped to the top of the cooler was a hastily penned recipe for the chicken from my dad, a scaled down version of the recipe he used for the Thanksgiving turkey. 'Be Safe!' was scrawled along the bottom edge of the note, and Jamen smiled, reading it as we lifted it into the trunk of the car with my skis.

We left a quiet Colorado Springs in silence, both of us savoring our individual travel mugs of coffee, each laden with cream and sugar. Jamen must've had to wake up at at least five thirty to make the drive to my place and leave his car there, so we were each more focused on waking up than anything else. But by the time we hit the highway, we were both starting to warm up.

"So what all do we have planned for this whole trip?" Jamen asked, slouched down in my passenger seat, head poking up from the depths of his anorak.

"Oh, I dunno," I mumbled. "Probably get there mid afternoon, walk around for a bit. I'll make some dinner and we can just hang out at the condo and do whatever one does at parties, I guess. Dunno about tomorrow. I brought my skis, in case anyone else wants to go out, and I've got an extra pair, too. We'll figure it out, I guess."

He laughed and sipped more at his coffee, "Well, sounds cool, I guess. Don't suppose anyone brought anything to drink for the party?"

"Not to my knowledge, no. Sorry. I don't think any of us are of age, and I dunno if anyone has progressive enough parents to get booze that way."

"Well, your dad gave you that beer, didn't he? Over break?"

I grinned, "Yeah, but I'm not sure I can picture him supplying five minors with alcohol."

"True, I guess." A minute or so passed before he continued, "Well, I brought an eight I've been saving all break."

"Really? Wow. Kris will be happy, at least. And Thomas."

“Mm. I couldn’t do anything with it at home other than, like, eat it straight, which is gross. Been pretty much stuck at home with parents and siblings.”

“Ooh, yeah, I suppose that does make it a little hard to smoke up,” I laughed. “So do you have more than just the sister you mentioned a while ago?”

“Yeah, two sisters and one brother.” He shrugged and sipped his coffee, “Two boys, two girls. I’m the oldest of everyone.”

“Oh, wow.” I shook my head, “I have a step sister, but I don’t really know her all that well. Only child otherwise.”

Jamen laughed ruefully, “I wish I was an only child, sometimes. I don’t mind my brother and sisters all that much, but it was kind of a pain growing up.”

“Yeah? How so?”

He shrugged, buried himself deeper in his coat, and mumbled a reply, “Brother found me out, outed me to my parents.”

“Oh. Jesus...”

“Yeah. I just about kicked his ass for that one.”

“Wow, yeah, I probably would’ve done the same.”

He shrugged. “He took after all the religious stuff my parents fed us all a lot more than I did, I guess. He’s probably even more gung-ho about it than they are.”

I shook my head and tried to imagine a family like that. “Not sure I get the whole religion thing.”

Jamen laughed, “I thought I did for a while, but when I sort of dropped out of the whole thing, I realized that no one really does, not even the pastor, not the congregation, not my family. I thought I could see it as sort of a framework or something, like a way to view the rest of the world, but then all sorts of weird stuff contradicts that, and no one else seems to see it that way. At least not down in Alamosa.”

“Never been down that far south,” I admitted, gently steering the conversation to a happier topic. “Looked it up online, though. Seems like a pretty small town.”

“Definitely. Just kind of an old mining town that managed to stick around after the mining died down. It’s something of a tourist attraction, too, for the sand dunes, and there’s a little college there, too.”

“Wanted to go somewhere away from parents but still in Colorado?”

“Yeah, definitely. It was a little more expensive, which my parents like to remind me of, but they’re rich enough.”

“Ah, alright.” I thought for a moment, “So you’re the oldest... Think your brother and sisters will go to college, too?”

“My brother and one sister might, but I’m sure my parents can afford to send them about anywhere.”

I nodded and we talked for a bit about the troubles my mom and step dad were going through, about how the early 2000s didn’t seem to be doing all that well in general when it came to the economy. It seemed like there was crisis after crisis in various financial sectors. The conversation petered out and turned towards food when we each decided that neither of us knew enough about the economy to offer anything other than generalized observations on it.

We were making surprisingly good time, considering the weather, so we stopped in at an IHOP in a southern suburb of Denver to use the restroom and grab a quick breakfast before we made the climb up out of the plains and into the mountains. Over pancakes and hashbrowns, we laughed over inane stories and planned out the trip a little further. Jamen didn't ski, but said he would be willing to try the snow blades — skis that were about two and a half feet long, much easier to learn on than full-sized skis — if more people planned on going out on the slopes the next day. We figured that we could check out late in the morning and get a few hours in on either side of lunch, then just toss the skis back in the car and head back home without having to worry about deadlines.

On our way once more, we talked little as we watched the Denver metro area thin out, climbing our way up out of town on I-70. We listened to the CD of jazzy rock from Japan that Kris had burned for me, the only non-classical CD I had in the center console collection. By the time we made our way past Genesee, the last outlier business district of Denver, we were settling into the rhythm of the drive. Traffic started to slow down as a whole once the cloudy sky started to spit a light scattering of wet snow down onto the road.

"So how do you think this next semester will work out?" Jamen asked, breaking the conversational silence.

I shrugged, "Alright. I don't think I have any difficult classes, or anything. Need to get a job, though."

He nodded, watching out the passenger side window. "Me either. Come up with any ideas of where you'd get a job?"

"On campus, I imagine. Maybe one of the dorms or something. I think I'm too late for work study, though, so it'll have to be an hourly thing."

"Work study's a bitch to get, I hear. If you work in the kitchens, I bet you can get free food all the time, though."

I laughed, "Probably. Then I can bring you and Thomas back some fries for when you all get the munchies."

Jamen smiled at me innocently. "I wouldn't dare ask."

"I would, too." I grinned, "Anything to get you guys to quit going to Waffle House. That stuff's pretty gross."

"Aw, come on!" he pleaded. "Just think, getting just totally blasted and walking over to the Waffle House where everything's funny, eating waffles made soggy by way too much syrup. Fuckin' delicious, man."

"Oh, God," I chuckled, shaking my head. "Don't even talk about it. Gonna make me sick."

"The butter that's not even butter," he grinned. "Grease coating the floors, the booths, the tables, the stools..."

I made gagging noises. Jamen laughed.

"Whatever, man," he shrugged. "You just don't know how to live."

"What, you think I should work at Waffle House so I can get you guys a discount?"

"There's an idea!"

"I think I'd shoot myself, sorry. Kill myself in the deep fryer."

“Ouch. Yeah, stick with the dorms. Besides, that walk would suck to make every day. Just for serving stoner after stoner, homeless guy after homeless guy.”

“Mmhm. Besides, I bet the dorms would be better at working around my class schedule. Also, no night shifts, so I can still get sleep and hang out with people.”

“Sounds good,” Jamen nodded, shrugging himself out of his jacket, what with the car being very warm by now.

I nodded, and we drove on. Traffic continued to slow down until we were going little more than thirty five. I was glad for our head start now, since it would probably be snowing up on Berthoud Pass.

“Think you’ll head back home for summer?” Jamen asked.

I thought for a moment, “Dunno, haven’t really thought about it, to be honest. I guess it depends on whether or not I get a job out in Fort Collins. If I do and I can work over the summer, I guess I’ll look for a place.”

“Totally should,” he said, sitting up straighter. “We should get a place with Eric and Joseph or something. Maybe Thomas, too, who knows.”

“Given it much thought, then?”

“Well, yeah. This break’s sucked, to be honest. I don’t think I really want to go back down there to live for more than a week, like during spring break.” He pulled a face and shook his head, “Gonna try and get a place up there no matter what, even if I just rent a room from someone else.”

“That’s a pretty good idea, though. I’d be up for it. I mean, I love my family, but I’m sick of driving back and forth between two homes. It’d be cool to have just one home to live in.”

Jamen laughed, “Can’t say I’ve ever experienced that. You’d be up for maybe looking into moving into a place with a couple of people, then?”

“Why not? I’m sure it’d be cheaper than the dorms. They’re crazy expensive. And hell, I bet I could live with you, Joseph and Eric, and I know I can get along with Thomas. What sort of place were you thinking?”

“Well, there’s some apartments that people have been suggesting. They’ve got some four bedroom places on two levels with a kitchen and main area. Or we could rent a house. There’s a girl in one of my classes that’s renting a three bedroom place in town. It’s the ground floor of a house, with a four bedroom place downstairs. Something like that would be cool.”

I nodded, surprised at how excited I was at the prospect. “Sounds nice, yeah. I’d really dig doing something like that, actually.”

We made our way up Berthoud pass discussing the details of how that might work. Who would likely do the most cooking in that group (me), who would be the loudest (Joseph with his computer games), where we should look for a house (north of campus). We laughed over what rules we should have regarding parties, girlfriends and boyfriends, and chores around the house. By the time we crested the pass, where the road divided the small ski area of Berthoud in half, it was nearing eleven thirty. With about half an hour of drive ahead of us, we were right on schedule for our noon check in at the resort hotel. We spent

the rest of the drive being excited at each other over the party, the coming semester, and the prospect of moving out north.

Retransition with dominant prolongation

Transition and modulation

Part III

Recapitulation

First theme in the tonic

Transition without modulation

Second theme in the tonic

Coda in the tonic

Appendix

The Sonata Form