What Doesn't Kill You...

by Storiesfromthebluebox

Summary

When Vyvyan becomes life-threateningly ill, this affects himself and the rest of the group, Rick in particular, in unforeseen ways.

Notes

I would like to say a few things before you start. I used to not be a big fan of using diseases for a fic, but I wanted to give it a go. I want to see how the dynamic between these characters would change if one of their lives would be seriously threatened in a non-funny way.

I would also like to point out this is fiction and I'm not in any way a medical expert, nor do I have first-hand experience with the particular disease and treatment depicted in this fic. I'm just a person who likes to write. So this will probably have quite a few inaccuracies when it comes to the medical side: things I should have included but overlooked due to a lack of experience, or things I included but aren't accurate etc. I hope you can forgive me for the sake of artistic liberty. However I will do my best to portray it as realistically as I can in a general sense. First and foremost, this story is about the friendship and love between these guys as a family as well as on other aspects, in extremely difficult times. But if you feel the need to correct me on something, please do.

I hope you enjoy this story.
Cover for this fic:
http://oi57.tinypic.com/33c1zcp.jpg
Chapter 1

It all started with a fight, Rick remembered. Or, nothing had really started. He read a lot of war comics, and he thought the whole concept of beginnings and endings was stupid. They were just random points in time where the writer decided to tell the story. Stories began with the occurrence of a problem, and they ended with a neat solving of that problem. In reality though, there were no real beginnings or endings.

There was just things happening, and sometimes those things were good, and sometimes they were utter rubbish.

But that's getting ahead of everything. As stupid as beginnings and endings were, that was probably how he would tell the story if he ever wrote a book. Not that he would. It would probably be a ruddy awful book. He knew people sometimes wrote books on these kinds of things, but he didn’t see why anyone would want to read them. It was all completely depressing if you asked him.

Getting back to the point: it started with a fight. Now there was nothing unusual about Rick and Vyvyan fighting, and there was nothing unusual or different about this particular day and fight either. Everything was normal, or, as normal as it ever was before the day everything turned around. It had been raining for days. It was almost as bad as that time England flooded and there had been sharks outside. There were no sharks now, though. Neil mentioned he’d seen a few turtles floating around the house, but no one paid attention to him anyway. He was probably on drugs, or whatever those stupid hippies did in their spare time. There were no turtles to be seen anywhere, as far as Rick could tell. It was all bloody boring. Anyway, the rain was bad enough that they couldn’t go outside and they had been locked up in the house for far too long. Neil was meditating in the middle of the living room, and Mike was fixing the toaster that Vyvyan had broken the other day.

Vyvyan had brought his explosive potions into the kitchen just to annoy the others, and him in particular, Rick was convinced of that. He was sitting on the couch trying to read one of his war comics, but was repeatedly disturbed by an explosion coming from the kitchen table. He observed Vyvyan from the corner of his eye. There was a bit of soot on his nose, and he was looking rather excited. Rick knew it would be dangerous to disturb him when he was in the middle of experimenting, so he would have to go about this subtly.

Rick put his comic on his lap, leaned towards Vyvyan and tried to smile politely. “Vyvyan, could you stop those noises, please? Thank you very much. I’m trying to read.” Demonstratively, he picked up the comic and turned the next page with vigor, to show how engaged he was in this utterly intelligent piece of lecture.

The punk didn’t even look at him. “Rick, I’m in the middle of something extremely important, so shut up.”

Stay calm, Rick told himself. You’re a responsible adult, you can do this without wanting to hit him in the face. “And why exactly can’t you do these experiments in your room?”

“Why can’t you read the bloody comic in your room!?” Vyvyan said, still not looking at him, but at a boiling potion that had too much of a resemblance to lava for Rick’s comfort.

“Because, Vyvyan, I’m actually trying to expand my intellectual abilities. Tell me, how does making things explode help society in any way? Finding a cure for cancer, are you?”

“I’ll help society by shoving a bloody fork in your throat if you don’t shut your bloody face!” Vyvyan yelled, now looking at him.
“Well that’s nice, isn’t it?” Rick said, as he put down the comic. “How utterly mature. I’m sure being violent solves everything”.

“SHUT. UP.” His friend was screaming at the top of lungs now. “Why can’t you just SHUT UP? You’ve been trying to interrupt my experiments for days now!”

“Oh so I’m the one bothering you, am I?” Rick screamed, standing up. The comic fell off his lap onto the ground.

“YES!”

Merely to piss him off, Rick grabbed a potion off the table and ran away with it. It wasn’t long before Vyvyan tackled him and crushed him with his weight, Rick’s back landing on the hard floor painfully. In a matter of seconds they were rolling over the floor and playing a game of ‘who can give and dodge the most punches.’ Rick dodged a few until a fierce jolt of pain shot through his jaw. *You bastard*, he thought, and tried to roll Vyvyan over.

To his own surprise, though, Vyvyan’s body gave zero resistance. He had him overpowered him in no time. Usually Vyvyan was much too strong to be affected by any attempts Rick made to free himself of his grip, but now the punk rolled over like a raggedy doll.

He was just about to give him a good jab on the jaw when he realized what was happening to the boy beneath him. Vyvyan was panting. No, no, that wasn’t right. It was more like hyperventilating. He was desperately trying to squeeze air through his lungs and nose, and making a whole lot of noise while doing so. Guessing this wasn’t some kind of trick, Rick got off him.

“Vyvyan, are you all right? Vyvyan…?” Unsure of what to do, Rick took him by the shoulder and shook him lightly.

Vyvyan couldn’t answer. He just lay there, gasping for air. It was like he was drowning, and the sounds he was making were scaring him. It sounded like his lungs had been replaced by old, rusty, clogged pipes. The disturbance had Neil awakened from his meditation, and he ran to their side.

“Oh no, guys, Vyvyan is, like, dying! Someone help him!”

“Shut up, Neil” Rick said.

He looked at his friend in panic. What should he do? Give him mouth to mouth? Vyvyan would forever call him a poof if he did that.

“Give him a smack on the lungs,” Mike advised.

Rick decided this would suffice, and gave him a smack with all the strength he had. It helped, because Vyvyan found the power to sit up and stumble over to the couch, where he sat down and slowly steadied his breathing.

“What in the name of Cliff’s trousers was that?” Rick asked, watching him suspiciously.

“No… thing…” Vyvyan brought out between two huffs. Rick wasn’t convinced.

“Well it didn’t look like nothing to me, young man! Also, is that blood on your arm?” He stared at Vyvyan’s arm in horror, where blood was swelling up from a small wound.

It took Vyvyan another minute to steady his breathing enough to be able to talk normally again. It felt like ages, and it made Rick feel uncomfortable. This was strange. Vyvyan was usually not someone
who collapsed after a bit of a fight.

“Yes, I’m bleeding!” Vyvyan said surly, having found his voice again. “Thanks for that, by the way.”.

“But how?” Rick couldn’t hide his shock.

“Because you beat me, you twat!”

“Oh come on, I barely touched you!”

“Well I’m bleeding, so apparently you did!”

Rick gave him a hard look, but Vyvyan just made a cross-eyed face at him.

“That sounded, like, really heavy, man.” Neil said. “Are you sure you’re okay, because…”

“I said it’s nothing!” Vyvyan screamed, after which he gasped for air again, but turned it into a cough.

“You should stop smoking, Vyv.” Mike said. That was the last word anyone said on the matter.

Rick would have forgotten about it if that had been the end of it, but it hadn’t been. The rain stopped the next day, and they were all relieved for a few minutes, until they realized they had no business outside anyway. Vyvyan had been whining non-stop about the rain and not being able to get away from them, but when it was finally dry, he didn’t go outside. Instead he was lying on the couch, watching the Bastard Squad.

“Aren’t you going to go outside, Vyvyan?” Rick asked.

“Nah,” Vyvyan said, and he grinned. “They’re going to blow up the Poof Squad now.”

Rick eyed him suspiciously before shrugging it off. So what if he felt like watching TV more than going outside? There wasn’t anything strange about that, was it? Except Vyvyan barely got off the couch anymore after that, except for a piss. This certainly wasn't normal behaviour for Vyvyan, and after a few days Rick got rather tired of it.

“All right, that’s just about the bloody limit, young man!” he yelled, making his anger clear by crossing his arms. “You’ve been lying around for a week now! For God’s sake, get your bottom off that couch!”

“What do you care what I do with my bottom, poof?”

That was a question Rick didn’t have an answer to, so he said: “I don’t! I don’t care at all! I’m just getting rather tired of smelling it all the time, is all!”

His punk friend made one of his cross-eyed faces at him. “Why don’t you just sod off, then!”

Another two days later, Rick caught him panting against the wall after going up the stairs. Vyvyan told him to piss off, which was normal, but it seemed as if there was something more intense about the way he said it. He started to pick up on the fact Vyvyan was avoiding going up the stairs when any of the guys were around. He always stayed up to watch the dot long after the others had gone to bed before going upstairs. Rick heard him once, and he had paused and rested at least three times before finally reaching the second floor.

Besides the stairs, the punk also seemed to be avoiding food. Not that the food in this house was
something Vyvyan ever got excited about before, but this was different. He didn’t even seem to enjoy it when Mike got everyone hotdogs.

He noticed the red spots for the first time one morning at breakfast. They were just under his shirt, on his uppers arms, and some on his wrist. Then some time later they appeared on the right side of his nose and on his neck. In some areas, it had started bleeding from all the scratching. And since when had he gotten so thin? He used to have a fat belly, but his shirt was sagging around his waist. Rick asked a few times what was wrong, but he usually said something like: “Shut up.” Rick didn’t want to talk about it.

Soon enough, Neil and Mike also started to pick up on Vyvyan’s strange behaviour. They were all so used to the punk’s occasional violent outbursts and furniture going out of the window on a daily basis, it was hard not to notice the lack of it lately. It hadn’t stopped immediately. At first, Vyvyan just got a bit out of breath after throwing something or smashing someone around the head with it, but it didn’t stop him from doing it. It never got as bad as the day of the fight. Until one afternoon he tried lifting a chair to smash Rick over the head with it, but gave up halfway. The chair was too heavy, and he had too little breath. Rick saw Mike raise an eyebrow, but all he said, as he took a sip of his coffee, was: “Had a late one, Vyv?” Vyvyan hadn’t tried throwing stuff anymore ever since.

On a Saturday night they went to the Kebab & Calculator, and they all had beer, except Rick, because he thought drinking was stupid. Vyvyan drank fast and seemed to be more energetic than he’d been in a long time. He chatted and drank excitedly. It seemed like whatever it was that had been wrong with him, it was gone now. Until after the fourth beer, he suddenly sprinted to the bathroom. When he still hadn’t returned fifteen minutes later, Rick went to if he was all right. He found him hanging over the toilet and throwing up every few seconds. He threw up until he was spitting nothing but gall. Rick just stood beside him, not knowing what to do, but having enough decency to know he couldn’t just leave him. After half an hour, Vyvyan had stopped throwing up, and he sat with his back against the tiles of the bathroom, his face sweaty and green. His forehead felt hot to the touch.

“Vyvyan?” Rick sat down beside him.

“What.” His voice sounded weak.

“Vyvyan, I think you need to see a doctor.”

“I don’t want to see a bloody doctor.”

“Wait here, okay? I’ll get Mike and Neil.”

Vyvyan had too little energy to protest. They carried him out of the bathroom together, and put him on his chair. He kept saying how he didn’t want to go to the doctor, but a few words from Mike were enough to shut him up.

“Vyv, this has been going on for long enough. We’re taking you to the hospital, and that’s the end of it.”

Mike went to get the car, while Rick and Neil kept an eye on Vyvyan. Not that he was in any condition to leave on his own. Rick went to wait outside, standing in front of the pub’s front door, keeping an eye out for the car. He felt a rather nervous feeling coming over him, and he wrapped his arms around each other in an attempt to hold these feelings inside. It was cold.
The ride to the hospital was completely insufferable. Not only because being in a car had brought back his nausea and it felt like his guts would come up and out of his mouth every time they drove over a bump, (they’d given him a plastic bag to be sick in) especially with Rick’s driving style, but also because those bastards wouldn’t shut the hell up.

“I tried telling you this earlier, you know!” said Neil, who was sitting next to Vyvyan on the backseat. “About Vyvyan. But you wouldn’t listen, since none of you ever listens to anything I say anyway…”

“Oh, would you get over yourself, Neil!” Rick hissed when he passed the car in front of them with a frightening speed. “This isn’t about you, you know. For God’s sake, would you stop acting so self-centered”.

“Calm down, all of you!” Vyvyan shouted. “If you’re going to take me to the bloody hospital, at least do it without being a bunch of bloody girls!”

“Don’t be so sexist, Vyvyan”, Rick said disapprovingly.

“Take a left here, Rick”, Mike instructed. He was the only one keeping his cool, but even his voice was slightly tense, and his mouth was a stern line as he stared out over the road.

Vyvyan wondered if this was what Mike looked like when he was worried. He didn’t have a lot of time to think about it though, as more gall rose up in his throat. He quickly opened the bag before he would spill it all over the car upholstery. The last thing he wanted was to ruin his car.

It took them a lot of shouting -both at each other and the traffic- and horrible driving to find the hospital, but by some miracle they managed to get there without Rick crashing the car and getting them all killed. This was a slight disappointment to Vyvyan. In his opinion, he would have done all of them a favour by it. He would much rather be in an exploding car than in the bloody hospital.

Vyvyan wanted to be a doctor, but he really didn’t really see the point in seeing a doctor himself. Yeah, he’d been having trouble breathing lately. He'd woken up drained in sweat every morning, he’d been too tired to walk much further than the bathroom, but it wasn’t like he needed to see a bloody doctor because of that. It probably was one of those nasty viruses he learned about in college. It had to be. The itching rashes were a bloody drag, as well, but he could live with it. So this was all completely unnecessary, but there was no getting out of it now.

Rick asked if he could walk, and he said that of course he could, bumface. But his head was dizzy and his legs were shaky as he got out of the car, trying to stand on the asphalt of the parking lot. After a few steps, he lost balance and smacked on the ground. He was embarrassed as Rick helped him up and put an arm around his shoulder to help him walk, but there was no point in resisting. By the way, he was secretly glad for his lungs. The parking lot was long.

Apparently someone had called the hospital when Vyvyan had been being sick, because they walked straight to the counter and Mike told the counter lady they had an appointment. He gave her Vyvyan’s name, as well as his own phone number. She told them to take place in the waiting room attached to the hallway and wait for the doctor to come get them.

Sitting down was bliss, even if he had been walking and standing for maybe fifteen minutes altogether. Exhausted and dizzy, the hall cradled slightly before his eyes. He tried closing his eyes,
but it didn’t help much. It still felt like he had a bloody hangover, but ten times worse. Somewhere far away, he heard the voices of his housemates bickering about something, but it was just background noise. Listening and making out the words would require effort, and he didn’t have a whiff of energy left. He never knew throwing up could make you so tired. Not that he minded not having to listen to those idiots. Maybe he should throw up more often.

He drifted and didn’t know how many minutes had passed until Rick shook his arm and the doctor stood before him. She was a stout woman in her thirties.

“You must be Vyvyan”, she said. She had a light Bristol accent.

“How did you know that?”

“Well, there’s not many people with Basterd for a last name. I’m an old friend of your mum. You look like her”. She smiled.

Vyvyan didn’t know if he was supposed to get excited about that. He just looked at her stupidly.

“Anyway, my name’s Doctor French, you can call me Silvia if you like. If you’ll follow me to my room, please, Vyvyan”.

“Doctor Silvia”, Rick said, getting up, “My name’s Wick. I’m Vyvyan’s best fwiend, and he can’t walk very well at the moment you see, so would it be all right if I join you?”

Doctor Anders looked at Vyvyan. “He’s lying. He’s just a complete bastard I happen to live with”, he explained.

She turned back to Rick. “You can help him walk to the door, but after that, you’ll just have to wait here, I’m afraid”, she said friendly. Vyvyan grinned.

When they sat in her room, the doctor asked him if he would like something to drink.

“Not particularly. Have you got any kebabs?” All this throwing up had made him quite hungry.

She laughed hard at that and said she hadn’t, but she had a sandwich left and she would give it to him if he liked, because she looked like he could use it. He said he did, and she waited patiently while he ate it like a hungry wolf. Then she started asking him about all of his symptoms. He told her about his breath, his night sweats, and showed her the rashes on his arm as well as the recent ones on his back and neck. She made notes and nodded frequently.

“Right”, she said eventually. “We’re going to give you a CT scan to see if we can discover anything unusual. You usually need an appointment for that, but we’ll make an exception in your case”.

She led him the Radiology Department and the room where the scan would take place, which had a big, round machine that looked a bit like a tunnel. Some bloke (the CT technologist, apparently) asked him to lie down and remove anything metal he had on him. Scornfully, he took off his nose ring and his studs. Apart from that though, he was rather excited about what was going to happen next. But before the scan could start, he had to get an IV injection. This took some time, as the bloke helping him had to find a suitable vein at first, and clean the spot with alcohol. The bloke explained this was done to highlight the organs on the scan. Now Vyvyan already knew all of that, but he’d never seen it up close.

“Cool!” he grinned, as he studied the way the injection was attached through patches and tubes.

“Now you may feel a bit of a strange sensation”, CT Bloke said, “but it won’t hurt”.

As the injection went in, he could feel the fluid rush through his arms, and an intense warm feeling spread through his chest.

It was no trouble at all to lie still for 30 minutes as the computer moved up and down his body, making a weird noise. Going up the elevator and walking through the hallway had made him tired, and he lay perfectly still as he watched the red laser lights creeping up from his feet to his shirt, over his head and back.

Mike, Neil and Rick were waiting for him next to the door of the doctor’s room, leaning against the wall and all looking equally bored. Rick was closely examining one of his bogies and Neil had fallen asleep standing up. Mike had been making paper planes from the hospital folders and he was lazily throwing one on an already significant pile. Each of them seemed relieved and nervous at the same time when Vyvyan and the doctor came back, except Mike.

The doctor told them the results of the test would be done in a few days, and they would get a call. Vyvyan knew this was the way it worked, but it seemed to deeply upset Rick for some reason.

“You let me wisk my own life to drive this poor sick young man to the hospital, and you’re only going to get the results in a few days? What kind of society is this!”

“I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is”, the doctor said.

“All right, time to go now”, Mike said as he pushed Rick towards the door and smiled apologetically. “Goodbye doc”.

“Fascists”, Rick muttered as they walked out of the room.

“Need a hand, Vyv?” Mike asked, turning over to him.

“No that’s all right”, Vyvyan lied. He felt better than when he got here, but he’d been standing for a while now, and he could already feel his body become tired. It was a relief when they were back in the car. Mike drove them back, which allowed Rick and Neil to bombard him with all sorts of stupid questions.

“Did they touch your bottom?” Rick wanted to know.

“No they didn’t touch my bottom, what do you think they do there? Getting degrees in poofiness?”

“Uhm, uhm, my turn”, Neil said. “Do they use any vegetable medicines?”

“I haven’t got a medicine yet, because I don’t know what I have yet, do I Neil!”

“Were there any sexy nurses?” Rick asked, making that stupid oinking noise.

“If there were, I don’t see why any of them would be interested in you!”

It went on like this for a while, and by the time they were home, Rick’s and Neil’s voices had long faded away, and he’d fallen asleep. When he woke up again, he was lying at the couch with a blanket, and it was 2:00 AM. He felt too tired to go up to his bedroom. It was the first time he was sick of being so tired.

He spent the next couple of days playing Monopoly, sometimes with the whole group, sometimes with Rick alone. In the moments he and Rick got in a fight and he smashed the game at his face, he forgot about it for a moment. He forgot he was ill, and that he had results of the scan soon, or any of that bollocks. Everything was all right in those moments.
On Tuesday, when he was having a relatively good day and sat on the kitchen table being bored, the phone rang. Mike picked it up.

“Mike the Cool Person here”.

“…”

“Vyv, it’s your doctor”. He reached Vyvyan the phone.

“Hello”, Vyvyan said.

“Vyvyan, it’s Doctor French”.

“Hello”, he repeated. He didn’t know what else to say. His throat felt tight.

“Vyvyan. We found something on the scan, and it doesn’t look good. It’s a huge mass in your abdomen, mainly around your lungs and upper chest, that isn’t supposed to be there”.

“What d’you mean?”

“It could mean a number of things. We don’t want you to worry yet, dear, but we’ve referred you to an oncologist and we recommend you go see him tomorrow and have another scan taken”.

Oncologist.

Doctor French was still talking, but he only kept repeating that word inside of his mind. A bloody oncologist. Suddenly he felt a strong urge to smash the phone against the wall and shatter it into a thousand pieces. He would smash anything really, as long as he wouldn’t have to hear another word on this rubbish. He didn’t want to see a bloody oncologist or hear what they had to say about any scan. He didn’t want any of this. After he’d hung up and said thank you, he walked away to get a hammer and smashed the phone. It didn’t make him feel better.

He told the others about it that afternoon. Of course, Rick acted like it was the most ridiculous idea he ever heard, but Vyvyan wasn’t sure if he actually believed it or was trying to relieve the tension. Mike and Neil were suspiciously quiet. The next morning they were back at the hospital. A nice man called doctor Richardson came to get him, but Vyvyan thought he was a bastard anyway. He was the Oncologist. Oncologists were bad news. You didn’t need to be a medical student to know that.

After the second scan, the diagnosis was clear. Despite him having learned about the disease in college, it didn’t get through to him the first time the doctor said the words. He didn’t understand. This must be some kind of sick joke.

Hodgkin Lymphoma, stage four. ‘Stage four’ meant it had progressed. It had progressed in his right lung, liver and bone marrow. Doctor Richardson explained it was one of the most common types of blood cancer and that it was generally easily curable, but he didn’t want to hear it.

“BUT HOW?” he shouted, to no one in particular.

The doctor started listing some of the possible causes, but he didn’t want a bloody answer. He wanted out of here. He wanted to be sick. He wanted to punch these walls. Everything was a haze in his mind, and the only things he registered were Neil going: ‘oh heavy, heavy!’ and Rick’s flustered face. Things probably happened after that, - they told him later he’d vomited all over his trousers- but that was the only clear thing he remembered from that moment: the way Rick’s face looked. He didn’t know why, exactly. Maybe because he hadn’t held it possible for Rick to give a fuck about anyone but himself. But that was the least of his problems.
“Cancer?”

The word felt uneasy on Rick’s tongue. Cancer was a strange word to him, a swear word. It was a disease he associated with dramas on the telly, romantic books and his uncle Harry who died when he was ten, but not with Vyvyan. Vyvyan couldn’t have cancer. It was a ridiculous concept. It didn’t match his reality. In reality, nothing ever happened to them and their boring lives. In reality, the worst thing that could ever happen to Vyvyan was him cutting off his own finger in an attempt to show them some stupid trick. He’d still lived in that reality only a minute ago. But now it was gone. As the People’s Poet, he was an expert when it came to words. But he had never understood until just a moment ago how just a single word could literally change everything. Cancer. He stared at Vyvyan, who had the same stupid face as he’d ever had. It looked the same, yet everything was different.

“There must have been some kind of mistake,” Rick said.

“It’s not a mistake. I’m very sorry,” the doctor said.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Vyvyan announced, and he got sick all over his trousers. That was when everyone started panicking. Or, he and Neil started panicking. Mike tried to calm them down, and Vyvyan just sat there.

Finally Mike got them to shut up by saying he didn’t like this any more then they did, but they had to listen to the doctor for Vyv’s sake. It was the slight trembling in his voice that made Rick stop screaming. It was very rare that Mike lost his cool, and the fact he did now meant things were serious. This was real. He needed to get himself together now. He tried to breathe and think of Cliff Richard songs.

_The young ones, darling, we’re the young ones. And young ones shouldn’t be afraid._

It helped a little to mentally sing these lyrics to himself, but it still felt like he was in a dream as he walked Vyvyan to the hallway, and asked a nurse for a clean pair of trousers. When they got one, Vyvyan took ages to change in the bathroom. Rick knew the punk was probably weak, but there was no way he would actually go inside and do it for him.

“Are you all right in there, Vyvyan?”

Vyvyan answered he was completely fine, and it felt like a normal conversation. But there was nothing normal about these circumstances. It was like he was watching a movie with them in it, and they were actors playing themselves. Even his own face looked wrong as he looked in the mirror. God, since when did he look like such a bloody cry-baby?

The doctor gave them a speech about the wonders of chemotherapy, which basically meant they would pump his body full of drugs, after which said drugs would kill cells. The good news was that it would kill the bad cells, the cancer cells, the ones that might cause him to die if they didn’t get treated. The bad news was it would also kill the good cells, and that meant he would become even more sick. It was hard to believe this was about Vyvyan.

“Possible side-effects are tiredness, sickness, hair loss…”

For some reason, the thought of Vyvyan going bald scared him more than all the other things he heard. He’d seen him without hair before, of course, but that had just been one of his stupid potions. This would be permanent. Or at least until whenever the bloody cancer would go away.
If it would go away. No, stop it, he thought to himself. He couldn’t think like that. Of course it would go away. It had to go away.

As the doctor explained, he just nodded, saying “yes, yes, of course”, like he was listening, but really, all he could think about was the knot in his stomach and the cancer in Vyvyan’s blood. The punk just sat there, arms crossed, looking straight ahead into nothing.

It was in the car on the way home when he spoke again, when they were in the middle of a discussion about who they should phone to tell the news. So far, the list of people they had come up with were his friends, and his mum.

“Don’t tell mum,” Vyvyan said. His voice sounded smaller and more fragile than it ever had.

“Vyvyan, she’s your mother,” Rick said. “I think she would want to know about this.”

“Spare yourself the trouble, Rick.”

“Give me one good reason your mother shouldn’t know about this!” Rick snapped.

“Because she doesn’t bloody care!” Vyvyan said, shouting now. At least he sounded like himself again, and for a few seconds it was almost as if everything was all right. But then it hit him again. Nothing was all right.

No one spoke after that, and the silence in the car grew heavy, almost palpable. It was so awfully silent that Rick wanted to scream. But what did you say to your friend who just got diagnosed with cancer? He didn’t know, and Mike and Neil obviously didn’t know, either. So they all just sat in silence, each of them wallowing in their own misery.

Vyvyan stared out of the window like an angry teenager who didn’t want to talk to his parents. Mike’s expression was unreadable behind his sunglasses.

Neil’s face looked like the face of a someone who’d just seen the apocalypse happen right before his eyes and had accepted his fate. Which wasn’t much different from usual, really. At least some things stayed the same.

As soon as they arrived home though, it was over and out with the silence. Vyvyan marched into the kitchen and grabbed a cup out of the sink. It shattered as he threw it against the wall.

Rick opened his mouth to say: “That cup cost me 50 cents, young man!” but shut it again just in time. Instead, he asked: “Would you like some water, Vyvyan?”

“NO.”

“Maybe you should, like, calm down and sit down for a minute…” Neil tried.

“I DON’T WANT ANY BLOODY WATER, I DON’T WANT TO SIT DOWN AND I’M NOT. CALM,” Vyvyan shouted. He threw another cup on the floor.

“Leave him to it, guys. He needs to get it out his system,” Mike said, grabbing a chair sitting down on it.

And so the next cup went against the wall, and the next, and when he was out of cups, he went for the plates. One by one, each of them crashed against the wall and covered the sink and the floor in a carpet of splinters. Meanwhile, Mike watched and encouraged him.

“Good one, Vyv! Go for the glasses!”
He cheered as Vyvyan swept all the glasses out of the closet, which landed on the floor with a deafening noise. Knowing it took very little to wear Vyvyan out these days, Rick figured he must be exhausted, but he didn’t stop until he’d thrown literally everything there was to throw. But the punk seemed beyond caring as he wrecked every object in the kitchen he could get his hands on. Rick had seen Vyvyan being violent more times than he could count, so really, this was anything but an unusual scenario. In fact, Vyvyan seemed more like himself than he’d seemed in days. But he’d never seen him so beside himself with rage as he was now.

Rick had also never seen him so vulnerable as Vyvyan sank to his knees, completely out of breath, sliding his hands into his hair. He sat like that for maybe five minutes, breathing heavily. Rick didn’t realize what was happening right away when Vyvyan’s sounds started changing. Wait, was he sobbing? Vyvyan, who had been calling him a poof and a girl for as long as he could remember, was sobbing on the floor. Any other day, he would have gladly made fun of him for this. But those times seemed ages ago now.

“It’s all right, Vyv,” Mike said, and he rubbed his shoulder. “Neil will make us supper and wash your trousers, and then we’ll all have a laugh, eh?”

Vyv’s whimpering went on for a while, and they just sat with him, without saying anything. Maybe in another time, in another life, they would have told him to shut up or felt mildly uncomfortable to see Vyvyan cry, but they all seemed to understand that the rules of the game had changed. The peculiar thing was: nobody tried comforting him, either. Not after Mike, anyway. What were you supposed to say? ‘Cheer up, mate? Have a pint?’ It was as if the four of them had a wordless understanding that they couldn’t share what Vyvyan was going through. But what they could do was keeping him company as he was going through whatever he was going through. And that’s what they did.

“I don’t understand,” Vyvyan said later, when he had finished sobbing and taken place at the kitchen table. His face was still a bit red. “No one in my family’s ever had cancer. Well, I don’t know about my dad. Mum never told me what happened to him…”

“It’s probably from all the chemicals in the food, Vyvyan,” Rick said. “With all these fascists poisoning our food, you could get cancer from anything these days.”

“That’s part of why I’m a vegetarian, right, because…” Neil began.

“Oh, shut up, you poofs”, Vyvyan said.

It was then that Rick realized that maybe, nothing all that much would change. Vyvyan may have been sick, but he was still Vyvyan. Nothing about that was going to change. And he was still Rick, and Neil and Mike were still Neil and Mike. He had never been happy about that before, or even cared at all, but now he was actually a bit happy they were all here, at the kitchen table. Not that he would ever admit that to any of the others.

And maybe, just maybe, Vyvyan would actually pull through. Rick may have had a principal mistrust towards hospitals, because he believed they were all run by fascists anyway, but he’d seen the doctors that would be treating Vyvyan. As much as he hated to admit it, for people working for fascists, they had seemed rather nice. He believed they were dedicated to making Vyvyan better. Besides, they had said he had a good chance of complete recovery. For the first time that day, it truly felt like everything might be all right.

On Friday, Rick took Vyvyan out into town to buy new tableware. When he’d asked him to come along, Vyvyan had rolled his eyes and wondered out loud who cared about those stupid plates, but he had followed Rick into the car anyway. Although he had loudly complained when Rick had
played his Cliff Richard cassettes in his car, Rick suspected him of being secretly glad to have an 
opportunity to get out of the house. He had been lying down and sleeping all day yesterday, and he’d 
been bored out of his mind.

They picked the cheapest set of plates and cups they could find, because they figured with idiots like 
Mike and Neil, they wouldn’t last long anyway. It was all their fault. With the last bits of money they 
had, they bought themselves ice cream. Vyvyan couldn’t walk long distances and had to sit down a 
lot, but other than that, there was nothing to remind them of the cancer situation. On their way back, 
they sang along Cliff Richard’s *Living Doll* at the top of their lungs.

The first chemotherapy session was scheduled on Monday. Before the treatment could start though, 
Vyvyan needed a small operation to have a tube implanted in his chest. Doctor Richardson had 
explained all this to them on the day of the diagnosis, but none of them had really paid enough 
attention to understand. So Vyvyan explained it to Rick again when they were sitting next to each 
other on the couch in the living room, after the others had gone to bed.

“It’s basically a small tube that goes into my chest, up to my collarbone and into a big vein, and the 
last six inches stick out of my chest. Now, that’s where the drugs go in…”

It was nice to hear him talk about this in a calm and medical way. It made Rick believe Vyvyan was 
above all of this, that he could overcome this.

On the day of the small operation, Vyvyan didn’t show any nervousness as they drove to the 
hospital. It was a small surgery that only took two hours, and he didn’t need to stay the night. Rick 
was secretly glad for this. Everything didn’t seem so serious when their housemate could just stay at 
home. After the surgery, when they went to see him in the hospital bed, he was curious to see the 
tubes sticking out of his chest. To his disappointment though, the wound was closed with tape. It was 
strange to imagine they would pour the cancer drugs through that small white spot on his chest.

That evening, the evening before the first chemo, Rick once again waited until Mike and Neil had 
gone to bed, and he and Vyvyan were alone.

“Vyvyan?”

The punk looked at him, with that typical expression of his. “What?”

“It will be all right, you know.”

Silence.

“Tomowow, the chemo. And, if you want someone to go with you, I could, you know, come with 
you.”

“I don’t need anyone to go with me, you girlie.”

Rick stood up. “All right, well, it was *just* an offer…”

“I mean, you can come with me, if you want,” Vyvyan added quietly. “It’s not like I particularly 
need someone to go with me, but if you insist…”

“Right. Well, I’ll come with you then. Are you going to bed?”

“Nah, I’ll stay on the couch for the night.”

“Goodnight, Vyvyan.”
“Nighty night,” the punk said, flipping his fingers in a V-sign.

Before going upstairs, Rick briefly paused in the doorway and looked at Vyvyan, who was looking at the dot on the telly. It reminded him of a moment a little over a year ago, when his housemate had been in that exact same spot, in the same position, and it was almost as if no time had passed at all. In this moment, everything was it should be.
The day after the diagnosis, Vyvyan had been lying in bed. Not much else. He liked to sleep, because then he didn’t have to think about the bloody cancer. He hated knowing there was something inside his body he had no control over. He spent quite a lot of the day punching holes in the wall. It took him a bit longer than it used to, since he felt tired. But that didn’t keep him from trying.

He slept.

He punched.

He still hadn’t called his mum.

When Rick had asked him if he wanted him to join on his first chemotherapy session, he’d said no, of course. He didn’t want Rick to think he was a sissy. But he then he suddenly felt awfully aware of the tube hidden under his shirt and in his chest, and he thought of the drugs going in there, and that he had no idea what it would feel like, and that it maybe terrified him more than he would ever say out loud. Maybe having Rick by his side wouldn’t be so bad. He had never imagined himself thinking this, but maybe seeing his stupid face next to him would be comforting. It was astounding, really, how having cancer had turned him into such a bloody poof. But he could not exactly afford to be picky. The chemotherapy would take three hours, and even that bastard Rick would be better company than no company at all.

Right before he went to sleep, he told himself to stop being a coward. If he was going to fight this, he would have to go along with all the bollocks coming his way.

He wasn’t hungry the next morning. His throat felt tight and dry. After continuous insisting of Rick, Neil made him eat a bowl of lentils that was completely revolting, but he just shoved it in as quickly as he could.

He drank two glasses of water because Dr. Richardson had advised him to drink a lot of water beforehand. Besides water, he’d also packed the last bag of crisps they had left in the house. Nobody complained about him taking it.

Because they had to be there a few hours beforehand to have some blood drawn, they had to leave early. The blood was taken by a strange nurse who told him it might be a bit “ouchy” before the needle went in. He rolled his eyes to Rick. It only hurt a little. He thought of Dr. French and the sandwich she’d given him. He would like to see her right now. The hospital felt like a much more hostile place without familiar faces.

He didn’t know what was worse: the waiting or Rick’s attempts to entertain him with stupid games during the waiting.

“I spy with my little eye… something beginning with the letter.. b.”

“What begins with a b?”

“The word I’m looking for”, Rick answered, clearly frustrated at Vyvyan’s ignorance about this game.

“Ah. Err. Is it my bottom?”

“No, Vyvyan, don’t be disgusting. It’s that water bottle over there, you see? You have to guess what
He came back with a pile of magazines that consisted mostly of girly bollocks magazines and one Playboy. Needless to say, he picked the latter, and they spent the rest of their time flipping through it and discussing which ones they would shag. It resulted in a fight where they both said no one wanted to shag the other anyway. They were both silent for a minute after that.

“Are you scared, Vyvyan?” Rick asked suddenly.

“No”, he lied.

“Because it’s all right if you are, you know, that’s why…”

“Well I’m bloody not!”

His housemate dropped the subject immediately, which was more than he’d expected from Rick. It was a relief when a nurse with short, blond hair came their way. “Vyvyan Basterd?” she called. Vyvyan stood up.

“That would be me”.

“My name’s Helen Saunders, I’ll be giving you your chemotherapy today”.

She spoke in a clear voice, and unlike the last nurse, in a normal, non-condescending way. He quite liked her. In any other situation, he wouldn’t have minded looking at her boobs up close. Right now though, he didn’t want to scare her off, so he just stared at them discreetly.

“And who are you, love?” she asked Rick.

“Oh, er. My name’s Wick…”

“He’s just a stupid bastard I live with”, Vyvyan said quickly, before his housemate could bring up any of that ‘best friend’ rubbish again.

She seemed amused by this. “Well, nice to meet you both”.

As they followed her to the infusion floor, she once again talked them through the basics of the procedure: that he would get pre-medication first, how long it would take, that Rick was allowed to stay with him for the whole time. He was a tiny bit relieved about that. No matter how hard he tried to ignore it, he felt the nerves increasing with each step closer to the infusion suite. His throat felt even more dry and his stomach felt like someone was constantly squeezing it together.

The infusion room looked surprisingly comfortable: there was a TV, a bed and a few blankets draped over it. But there also was a lot of machinery with tubes and bags, and he wondered where they all would go. He noticed Rick shoving a little closer to him. Their arms brushed, the fabric of Rick’s jacket against his bare arm. What a girl, he thought. He was probably thinking about holding his
hand. In fact, if Rick had been an actual girl right now, he probably would have done it, too. Contrary to popular belief, though, Rick wasn’t actually a girl. So there was no hand holding involved as they walked in.

First off, he needed to be hooked up to a monitor to check his vital signs. It looked like nothing more than a Dying Machine to Vyvyan, and he must have looked slightly distressed, because Helen reassured him it was only to make sure he didn’t have any bad reactions to the medications.

The scent of alcohol was penetrating as Helen cleaned the catheter in his chest with an alcohol swab, before attaching the IV line. The line led to an infusion pump, where the drugs hung on. Even Rick, who almost hadn’t shut up for a moment since they entered this bloody place, turned quiet and pale. Vyvyan himself took a deep breath and swallowed hard. Yesterday he may have felt brave, now he was shitting bricks. The process started with what they called a ‘flush’, which meant they’d give him a drug to keep his blood from clotting. Helen said he wouldn’t feel this, but he might experience a nasty taste in his mouth, -it sure had a nasty smell- so she gave him a very sour candy to suck on.

It took another 30 minutes for the pre-medication and chemotherapy cocktail –that’s what they called the Cancer Drugs, to make it sound less revolting, Vyvyan assumed- to arrive. They arrived in a green bag.

“A chemo cocktail?” Rick had wondered out loud. “Is it going to make him drunk, then?”

If he had been in the position to do so, Vyvyan would have slapped him. Unfortunately, he was hooked up to the pump.

So he just said: “Rick, do everyone in this room a favour and shut your girly mouth”, as Helen attached the first bag to the pump.

It surprised him how bloody uneventful it all was. Mostly, it was just drugs dripping into through the IV line and into his chest, and sometimes there were ‘pushes’, injections given through the line. It all looked scary, but it didn’t hurt, and he wasn’t vomiting or screaming. He was just lying, studying everything that was happening with apprehension, but curiosity.

The anti-anxiety drugs made him woozy, and sometimes he dozed off for a few minutes. When he wasn’t, he was watching TV with Rick. They only had one channel though, which was bollocks. Helen sometimes came in to check his vital signs and see if they were doing okay.

'Uneventful' had been mildly putting it. After a while he started to get quite bored and fed up with the lying around. God knows how much he hated being bored, but it wasn’t so bad for once. It was better than the terror he’d felt before the chemo. Besides, it felt quite good to be kicking cancer in the bottom. Rick, who hadn’t left his side until they’d come in, seemed to act relieved as well. It was like the tension had dropped, and they could talk and pretend this wasn't a highly unusual and nasty situation. They could handle this. Maybe this wouldn’t be so horrible. Maybe they would really make it through this and he wouldn’t die.

“Are you all right?” Rick asked softly at one point, he didn’t know when.

“Completely fine, matey”, he said, as he dozed off again.

They were out of the hospital before five. He actually felt quite all right. It was like he was ten pounds lighter. Still sleepy from the drugs, he slept in the car on the way back home. Neil and Mike had actually gone out of their way to put a somewhat decent meal on the table, -cooked potatoes with beans- which might as well be a bloody miracle. Even though Vyvyan had never liked beans much, he didn’t complain, because he was starving.
It was later that evening after supper when he screamed his lungs out in the bathroom. Rick was at the door immediately.

“Vyvyan, what’s wrong?”

“I PISSED BLOOD!”

“You did what now?”

“I BLOODY PISSED BLOOD. I’M GOING TO DIE”.

“Oh… right, I forgot to tell you that. When you were sleeping, Helen told me your pee will turn red for a while”.

He took a few deep breaths. “Well, thanks for telling me Rick!” he snarled sarcastically. “You’re so very helpful!”

The nausea and the heat kicked in the next day. He woke up in cold sweat, feeling sick to his stomach, his chest abnormally hot. It was like he was glowing from the inside out. He called Rick through the wall, announcing he was going to be sick, and his housemate quickly showed up with a bowl for him to be sick in. As he threw up, Vyvyan wondered how pathetic he must look in Rick’s eyes. He wondered if he pitied him. He didn’t want to be pitied. He wasn’t pitiful. But he felt bloody awful.

And the hunger. The hunger was all-consuming. It hadn’t stopped since yesterday, it had doubled. Later that afternoon, Neil showed up with a bag full of groceries.

“Hello, Vyvyan. Rick told me to buy you food, right, and since I’m the only one who ever does anything around here… well at least I was, I mean, Rick’s been doing some things as well...”.

“Yeah, yeah, just show me what you bought, hippy”.

It was bread, a thermos with tea and Toblerone. He assumed Rick had made the grocery list, no one else in the house would want to buy such a girly thing as Toblerone and make tea. Still, he had gone of the trouble of doing those things. And Neil had gone to the trouble of going to the store and buying him more food than he usually bought for the four of them all together.

“Thanks, Neil”, he said.

Neil stopped on his way out, seemingly surprised.

“Uhm, you’re welcome, Vvy”.

He ate until he got nauseous again and he couldn’t do more than lying and feeling miserable. That day, he stayed in bed. He was too exhausted to come downstairs.

There was a knock on his door early next day. It was Rick, telling him he would come in and help him downstairs. Which he did, ignoring Vyvyan’s light protests and whimpers. He didn’t like walking too much at the moment, but Rick insisted he would come downstairs. It was so they could keep an eye on him, he said. So the next few days were spent on the couch, which, granted, was a better place.

It was mostly Rick that did things like putting a wet washcloth on his forehead when he got too hot, or giving him food when he got hungry. If he just have had a flu or something, he would have enjoyed this. But then again, Rick probably wouldn’t have gone to the trouble.
Mike usually gave the orders.

“Give Vyv some water, Neil, he looks thirsty”, he would say.

Rick would jump up and say: “I will do it”.

He didn’t understand why Rick was so eager to take care of him. He felt like human garbage. The symptoms weren’t just limited to nausea now, he could feel it in his whole body. It felt all wrong. Some muscles felt numb, some randomly twitched every now and then. The exhaustion was like nothing he ever felt before. It consumed him, engulfed his every bone, and it wasn’t just his body either. It was like his mind was just as drained. He had trouble speaking. Words were okay, but constructing full sentences was too much of an effort. He couldn’t do anything but lie there. Eating was a problem, too. If he had been in his right mind, he’d have never let Rick spoon feeding him. Now, he didn’t have any energy to feel embarrassed. He could only feel horrible.

It was only about a week after the chemo he felt somewhat like himself again. He was still weak, but his body felt somewhat normal, to the point where he could get up and get himself some breakfast.

“Feeling well today, Vyvyan?” Rick asked him, coming into the kitchen.

“Yes, actually,” he said, his mouth full of cornflakes.

Rick sat down next to him. “Good. That’s... that’s great”. He smiled faintly, rubbing his neck. It was only now Vyvyan noticed Rick looked a bit tired and pale as well. It had only been two weeks since the diagnosis, yet he clearly looked different. Less like a whiny girl, and more like... a more grown-up version of Rick.

“Monopoly?” he asked him. He couldn’t hold back a weak grin as Rick looked at him in surprise. The smile felt a bit weak and strange around the corners his mouth, and it took him a few seconds to figure out why. That was the first time that week he smiled.

And so they played Monopoly, just a bit less violent version than usual. This didn't keep him from trying to bother Rick as much as possible though, and for once, it didn't seem to bother Rick quite as much. For now, things were bearable.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

I would like to dedicate this chapter to Rik Mayall, who died five days ago as I’m posting this. His death was a huge shock for me and it slightly influenced this chapter. At first, I wanted this chapter to be a long conversation between Rick and Vyvyan about death. I’ve been thinking a lot about what death and being remembered means, and I wanted to write a load of blabla about that, but now that the first shock has subsided this chapter has turned out pretty normal after all. There’s still a little part of the idea left though, at the end.

I don’t believe in forever, but I hope Rik Mayall will be remembered for a very long time, and more importantly: that he will be remembered in all the best ways.

Vyvyan started losing his hair some time before the second chemotherapy session. Rick had found a few dots of ginger hair in the sink and more in the shower. This was the thing he had feared most of all, for Vyvyan not to look like his healthy self anymore. Of course the rashes and the weight loss were indications he wasn’t well, but Rick thought nothing screamed ‘I may be dying’ more than a bald head. Well, except old people. Which was basically the same thing.

He especially hated when cancer patients wore dish towels over their bald heads. He had seen it on other patients in the hospital when they went for Vyvyan’s chemotherapy, and it was sickening, in Rick’s opinion. He hoped Vyvyan wouldn’t start wearing one of those once he turned bald. His hair had become thin and fragile, though. He didn’t wear a Mohawk as often anymore.

When the second chemo approached, they all dreaded it. Two days beforehand, Vyvyan turned quiet and moody, staring into space sulkily. Neil made them all more lentils than they could eat, and Mike gave him a speech that was meant to be uplifting.

“Look at it this way Vyv: a fish may be out of the water, but at least he isn’t drowning”.

Vyvyan just looked at him stupidly, and for once, Rick couldn’t blame him. Mike never made much sense, even to someone as intellectually gifted as himself.

“Uh, what are you doing here, Rick?” Vyvyan asked when he came downstairs with the backpack full of food they made him yesterday. He could never lift heavy things for too long, so he put it on the ground.

“Yes, I know, you didn’t ask, but here I am anyway, sacwificing my beauty’s sleep for your well-being”. He sighed dramatically, so Vyvyan would understand what a noble and selfless deed he was doing.

Vyvyan looked at him for a second. “Poof”, he murmured, but he grabbed his bag, walked to the car, and took place next to the driver’s seat.

The chemotherapy itself wasn’t scary anymore. It already felt familiar as they walked into the hall and Helen received them on the infusion floor. Even the infusion room with the smell of alcohol felt safe and familiar, even if the scent was disgusting.
Helen talked about everyday things as she prepared Vyvyan – hooking him up, cleaning his tubes with the alcohol patches and flushing him. Had they seen the latest football match? Had Vyvyan eaten all right? Vyvyan tried answering these questions as normally as he could. Rick observed the punk with mild surprise. He’d never seen his housemate act so humble and normal. It was a side of him he’d only seen a few times so far, which had been during the few interactions with his mum.

Rick thought Helen liked Vyvyan, because she gave him a lot of those special candies that were supposed to fight the nasty taste of the flush drug and helped him drink when he was lying down. (The drugs made Vyvyan extremely thirsty.) This annoyed Rick just a tat, because this was his task. Normally, he would have snapped at her, but he didn’t. After all, she was helping him, he supposed. She also brought a tape with the first season of The Bastard Squad, since last time Rick had mentioned it was Vyvyan’s favourite show.

“AH, brilliant!” Vyvyan had called out with a grin. He looked excited as a child.

Both of them had already seen all the episodes, because they’d had a lot of time on their hands when Vyvyan had been sick last week. Rick thought the program was so boring and uncivil he’d rather stare at his own bottom, but Vyvyan erupted in shrill laughter every few minutes. He wished he’d brought his war comics. They may have a very reactionary character, it was always better than this rubbish.

For the first hour or so, Vyvyan managed to stay awake, because the anti-anxiety drugs hadn’t yet kicked in. Despite him having said repeatedly chemo was completely boring, they’d still given him a huge dose. Rick wondered if his housemate really didn’t feel a shred of anxiety. He certainly would, if he were the one they were pumping drugs in.

After about two and a half episodes, the punk started to doze off. He noticed because the responses, sounds and laughs that had been coming from the bed subsided. Rick observed him. It hit him that Vyvyan wasn’t the outrageous, crazy, invincible punk he knew him as all the time. He was only one year older then himself. A 22-year old boy with a nose ring and a few studs on his forehead, who could be weak and helpless. This had never been so painfully obvious to Rick as it was in that room, as he lay there hooked up to the pole with the bags of drugs seeping into him. His face looked only slightly more puffy around the cheeks, (because of the steroids, he had learned) his hair was frail and unstyled.

It scared him a little, because it made him look more like a sick person. He’d never thought he’d be having any thoughts about the state of his housemates face, or pay any attention to it at all. But in those hours to kill, when Vyvyan slept, with only the sounds of Bastard Squad on the telly, he found himself looking at it a lot.

“Charming fella, isn’t he?” Helen said, nodding at Vyvyan, as she unexpectedly walked in on him staring at him.

He looked up, feeling strangely busted. “Pardon?”

She sat down on the seat next to him. “You really like him, don’t you?”

“Oh, uh…”, he stammered. “Well not in a poofy way, if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t fancy him or anything like that”. He couldn’t suppress a snort.

“When said anything about fancying?” she said and she winked as she stood up. She checked Vyvyan’s vital signs, and left the room.

Rick had no idea what she was winking about. He wasn’t sure if she had just implied he liked Vyvyan, but if she had, it was a silly thing to imply. He was only here because… who else did he
have? All this stuff was probably too heavy for Neil, and he couldn’t picture Mike having the patience to sit here for three hours without trying to hit on one of the nurses or even patients. Vyvyan had never liked any of his friends, and his mum didn’t even know he was sick. Strange as it was, he felt like he had to be here.

When he woke up to Vyvyan screaming in distress the next morning, and found him with vomit all over his bed sheet, he knew last week’s misery would start all over again. And it did. The being sick, the sweating, the hunger… they didn’t even fight about whose turn it was to get the groceries. Neil just went, without complaining, saying he’d be back soon. Most of their time went into making sure Vyvyan wasn’t into too much discomfort or pain. He barely had time to think. He just knew he was tired. Any moment when they could just sit down and relax was heaven sent.

That night when Vyvyan was sleeping, and they all sat down tired, it was Neil who broke the silence.

“Hey, guys. I was thinking, right. This whole situation with Vyvyan has been really heavy and it really has been bringing everyone down, okay. So maybe we should like, talk about it”.

“Neil, it’s very rare that you have good ideas, but I agree”, Mike answered. “Let’s have a house meeting”.

So they all took their place at the kitchen table. Rick wasn’t sure what there was to discuss, it seemed very simple to him. It was nice to talk about their experiences, though. He even may have cried a little. He was secretly glad Vyvyan wasn’t here to see it.

“Nobody likes this situation, guys”, Mike concluded. “But Vyv needs us. So we have to keep helping him, and we have to keep it together”.

Rick didn’t think he would ever get used to Mike being so serious and making so much sense. The world didn’t make a lot of sense to him anymore. It never did, since it was full of fascists and someone like Thatcher was in the government, but a world where Vyvyan got sick made even less sense to him.

On Tuesday, they got all his linen cloths downstairs, so he could permanently settle there. It was incredible to Rick how rapidly Vyvyan’s condition could turn around. Only a week ago, he’d still had his Mohawk. He’d still seemed pretty healthy. If it wasn’t for him being tired so easily and not being able to smash the furniture, you wouldn’t have known he was sick. That was different now. He needed their help with everything. When he was hungry, when he was thirsty, even when he needed to go to the bathroom: even though he insisted he could do the part inside the toilet himself. (“I’m not having you wipe my bottom!”) Other than that though, there weren’t a lot of things his housemate did on his own. He watched the TV on his own, and slept on his own, but that was about it. And even then Rick often stayed close or by his side. He’d even considered dragging his mattress downstairs -he didn't want him to be on his own when he broke out in cold sweat at night- but that went a bit too far even for him.

Vyvyan’s frustration about all of this sometimes resulted in a lot of shouting, and then he shouted at his housemates for trying to calm him down, and then Rick started shouting back. He knew it wasn’t right to shout at Vyvyan like that, so decided to start handling it with the best of patience he could bring. Which wasn’t a lot.

“Rick”, Vyvyan said on Friday. The worst days were over and the peace in the house was somewhat restored. “Can you give me a glass of water, please”.
Rick was filling in an assurance form for the treatment. It had a lot of difficult words. He’d ask Mike to help him, but he didn’t want to seem stupid. Besides, Mike wasn’t here right now. He was out applying for a job.

“Not now Vyvyan, I’m busy”.

“I don’t have all day, do I now!” Vyvyan snarled.

“I said I’m busy”.

“Well I’m very very thirsty, and very very bored!”

“Well you’re not the one having to take care of all the business, are you Vyvyan?”

“You’re not the one with bloody cancer, are you!”?

“Oh, so you’re more important than us because you’re sick? Is that it? I have been doing nothing but take care of you for the past week! You might as well start showing some bloody gwatitude, young man! Or you can go get that glass of water yourself!”

Vyvyan’s face suddenly looked like he was about to cry, and Rick was immediately sorry.

“Vyvyan, I… I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry.”

He put his hand on his shoulder, and considered hugging him, but decided that would be poopy. Vyvyan sniffed.

“’S all right. I know you’ve been doing a lot of things lately. I suppose if I die, you would be the one to arrange my funeral, as well”.

It felt like he had dropped a bomb. “Vyvyan, you’re not dying”, he said, jaws tightening. "You are fighting this and you’re surviving this, have I made myself clear!?"

He really was angry. Angry at Vyvyan for daring to say something like that, for using the words dying and funeral like it was something that was possible. Even though it was possible. He knew that. But he couldn’t allow those thoughts into his mind. Because he suspected as soon as he would do that, he was going to let in a whole lot of other thoughts he wasn’t sure he was ready for.

He couldn’t shake the idea now, though. It was there, lurking in his subconscious and eating away at him. The thought of Vyvyan cold and lifeless, like he wasn’t the most agitated and alive person he knew, was enough to make him want to vomit. He almost did, as he lay in bed, and he pulled the sheets over his head trying very hard to ignore the feeling of choking fear that had been creeping up on him from the day of the diagnosis. He thought about Helen saying he liked Vyvyan. Was liking someone the same as not wanting them to die? He didn’t know. He didn’t think he’d ever really liked someone before. He’d always thought Vyvyan was a pain in the arse. That didn’t necessarily mean he wanted him to go, though. He understood that now. He really, really didn’t.

Death was a little bit like a wound, he realized the next day. Vyvyan had accidentally knocked himself against the hook of the kitchen table and had a pretty big jab on his arm. His condition made him bleed very easily, and it poured out like a waterfall. After the worst bleeding had stopped, Rick put him on the kitchen chair and disinfected the wound much in the same way he had seen Helen disinfect his tubes. He grabbed the vodka bottle from the fridge and poured it on a piece of toilet paper. Vyvyan screamed his lungs out.

“That bloody hurts, you prick!”
“Sit still, poo-hole”, Rick hissed, “Or I can’t disinfect it”.

His housemate almost perished in pain as he brought the alcohol-drenched piece of paper to the wound. Thankfully, the job was done in only two minutes.

He thought about death when he neatly covered the wound with a plaster. When someone died, he thought, maybe it was a bit like a wound, leaving those around you injured. It left a hole, and it hurt, and after some time new skin would grow over it and it would be gone. Any physical evidence that the wound had ever been there would have disappeared. But it’s short existence would keep affecting the ones that knew it had been there. Because they’d known about it. And because of that, the thought of it could still affect them. At least not until those people died themselves. He didn’t want Vyvyan to be anyone’s wound.

“Vyvyan, can I ask you something?” he asked, as he sat down next to him.

His housemate sighed. “As long as it’s not a very boring question, I don’t see why not”, he said, sounding extremely reluctant, but Rick went ahead and asked the question anyway.

“Are you awfaid...? Of dying, I mean.”

“I thought you said I wasn’t dying, bum face!”

“Yes, I know, but... what if you did anyway?”

Vyvyan shrugged. “I wouldn’t be doing much, I suppose, because I’d be dead, wouldn’t I?”

“That’s not exactly my question, see…”

“Then what exactly is your question Rick?!” Vyvyan silenced him. "Do I want to die? Not particularly! Do I sometimes wish I was instead of having to go through all this bollocks? Yes!”

He screamed, but his face looked broken, and Rick thought he felt his eyes sting.

“Well, don’t, okay?”

“Don’t what?”

“Die, of course”, he said, annoyed that he had to repeat it. “Just don’t... die, all right?” He gave him a hard look to make his words more powerful.

Vyvyan sighed again, but this time it wasn’t annoyed, or angry. It was exhaustion. “I’m trying, Rick”.

Rick changed the subject soon after that, and he felt slightly better than before the conversation. It hadn’t been much of a conversation, really, but Vyvyan had said he was trying. That he wasn’t just giving up. That was more than he had hoped for.

The next morning, Rick almost spit out his tea when Vyvyan appeared at breakfast. He was bald.

“Trying out a new look, Vyv?” Mike asked.

“I supposed, if I’m going to go bald anyway, I might as well do it all at once”, Vyvyan said. “So I took Rick’s Lady Shaver, and shaved my head”. He grinned proudly.

“Shut up!” Rick screamed, furious that Vyvyan went through his stuff again. “He’s joking, of course”, he explained to the others. “I haven’t got anything like that”.

“Thanks, Neil”, Vyvyan said.

Granted, it didn’t look half as bad as Rick had imagined. It really didn’t look any different from that time he took the potion. The punk was visibly feeling better, and his grin lit up his whole face. He didn’t look like a dying person. He just looked like Vyvyan who happened to have a bald head.

“Vyvyan? Would you mind if I… feel your head?” he asked that evening, when the two of them were sitting at the couch. He’d been wanting to ask it all day.

“All right”, Vyvyan murmured, half-asleep, and he slightly tipped his head toward Rick.

Vyvyan’s head felt smooth and cool as he let his hand slide over it. He quite liked the feeling of it. Absently, he caressed it as Vyvyan dozed off with his forehead against his shoulder. When he realized he was being poofy, he stopped. He watched the dot until he fell asleep too.
“Well, the girls seem to like it”, Vyvyan commented loudly to Rick one afternoon.

The sun felt warm on his head. It was 16 degrees and the first slightly sunny day in March. They were sitting in the garden with plastic cups and a thermos with lemonade Neil made himself. It tasted bloody disgusting, but what else did he expect.

He was wearing Mike’s sunglasses. Rick had snatched them away and given to him to ‘protect’ himself against ‘overexposure’ from the sunlight. It had also been Rick who’d insisted he would go outside, because ‘a bit of fresh air would do him good’.

It was all complete rubbish, but if it made Rick shut up for a few hours of the day, he’d gladly sit here for a while with Mike’s sunglasses drinking Neil’s lemonade. To be honest, he was actually quite glad to be outside after wasting away inside for so long.

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“My head”, he explained. “The lads took me to a pub yesterday, and these birds all thought I was a skinhead. One of them even gave me her number”. He grinned, but Rick didn’t seem very amused by the story.

“Like what?” Rick had his eyes closed and his face turned up against the sun, probably hoping to get some tan on that snotty, pale face.

“My head”, he explained. “The lads took me to a pub yesterday, and these birds all thought I was a skinhead. One of them even gave me her number”. He grinned, but Rick didn’t seem very amused by the story.

“That’s disgusting, Vyvyan”. He stopped tanning and gave him an angry look. “Lying to attract birds is exceptionally sexist, you know”.

Maybe he was angry because he hadn’t approved of Vyvyan going out last night. Well, sod him. Rick had been in his company non-stop ever since he became sick. He deserved a bloody break. Although his housemates extreme concern could come in handy sometimes. He only had to cough and fake some shortness of breath, and Rick would rush to his side to try and steady his breathing in the best way he could think of, after which he’d give him anything he wanted for the rest of the day and he didn’t have to do the dishes. Sometimes he didn’t have to fake it though. His lungs felt awfully tight these days, and he’d developed a nasty cough.

“You’re just jealous you never score any chicks, virgin!”

“I am not!” Rick yelled. “And if you say that word one more time I’m not giving you any dessert!”

“Virgin”, Vyvyan said. “Virgin virgin virgin vir…”

“All right that’s it’, Rick started, eyes so big it wouldn’t surprise Vyvyan if they’d fall out. “That’s just about the bloody limit…”

“Having a bit of a domestic, guys?” a voice said from behind them. It was Mike, dressed in his favourite tropical outfit, complete with water wings around his arms.

“Vyvyan’s being silly. He’s saying I’m a virgin”. He sniffed.

“You are a virgin, Rick”, Mike said, getting out a chair. “The sooner you accept that… well never mind, you’re hopeless”.

“Told you, virgin”, Vyvyan said, smiling towards Rick. There was little as amusing to him as pissing Rick off, and it was certainly a good way to take his mind off things.

“All right, all right”, Rick said, pacing back and forth now. “What about that time the cash girl put
her hand in my trousers?”

“She was trying to get those sweets you were trying to steal!” Mike called out.

“Damn!” Rick cursed silently.

Vyvyan was just about to open his mouth to annoy Rick some more, when he was interrupted by Neil, who came through the backdoor with a fishing net over his head.

“Hello everyone, hello, I’m here, but don’t pay attention to me because you never do anyway…”

“Neil”, Vyvyan said. “You never seem to tell us anything we don’t already know”.

“You’re probably all wondering why I’m wearing a fishing net around my head, aren’t you”, Neil said as he took place on another chair.

“When have we ever showed any interest in anything you do, Neil?” Rick commented. “I don’t know how to make it any clearer we all find you completely bohwing”.

Ignoring this, Neil went ahead and explained why he was wearing it anyway, (it was because warm weather meant there were a lot of mosquitos outside and he doesn’t abuse his body in the world he lives in) and they all sighed and moved onto more important subjects like the chick whose number Vyvyan had scored.

They sat outside drinking Neil’s lemonade until it was around five o’clock and the sun was low, casting an orange glow over the garden. Vyvyan decided it was probably safe to take off Mike’s sunglasses now, and the last faint sunbeams of the day warmed his face. He had to admit: it was quite nice being like this, sitting in the garden and drinking that bloody awful lemonade with the others, like everything was normal. Normally he hated normal, because it was so bloody boring. But he was all right with normal now. It had made him forget about the tightness in his chest and his next hospital visit for a bit.

When it got too chilly, Rick threw an arm around him to help him get up and get inside, while Mike and Neil cleaned up the plastic cups. Inside on the couch, Vyvyan wrapped himself up in his favourite blanket. Mike ordered pizza and they watched the telly complaining about how nothing exciting ever happened until he felt himself become heavy and fell asleep.

He would long back to that peaceful moment a few days later. He woke feeling like his lungs were imploding. He couldn’t breathe. His chest was hurting. Panic took hold of him as he desperately tried to squeeze some air through his lungs. It barely worked. Oh dear.

“HELP!” he squeezed out. “Rick…” his voice died away.

Rick, who’d slept on the couch that night, was quickly awake. In no-time, Rick had woken up the others and next thing he knew, they were dragging him to the car and driving to the hospital with Godspeed. He was breathing very quickly now, and his heart was beating like a maniac. Mike was behind the wheel, Rick and Neil to his sides.

“You’re all right, you’re all right”, Rick kept repeating, like a sort of mantra. He didn’t feel all right, but it did help. A little.

Nevertheless, he wanted to scream: ‘Drive faster, you bastard, I’m dying’, but he couldn’t. Mike didn’t need the encouragement, though. He already drove dangerously fast.

“OUT OF THE WAY YOU BASTARDS, THIS IS AN EMERGENCY”, Rick shouted, as he
marched through the hospital doors with Vyvyan draped around his shoulder. Everyone stared at them. Vyvyan really couldn’t care less.

He made it until the desk before collapsing. He heard the desk lady talking through the phone. “We have a boy here, he appears to be hyperventilating or suffocating…”

They put him on one of those hospital beds on wheels, giving him an oxygen mask to breathe through. They were driving him somewhere, but he didn’t know where. He didn’t register much of what was going on, except that his housemates were still walking with him.

With the dizziness and the disorientation clouding his mind, he had the sudden urge to have something, anything, to hold onto. So he reached out and the first thing he found was a hand. Rick’s hand. Oh, crap. Well, to hell with it, he thought. He grabbed it, and surprisingly, Rick didn’t reject it. Instead, his fingers folded around Vyvyan’s. He didn’t think he’d ever squeezed anything as hard. Not even that time when he’d tried to strangle SPG. He kept squeezing until he finally blacked out.

When he woke up, there were two things he noticed. One: there was an oxygen tube tickling in his nostrils and hooked behind his ears. Two: he was wearing one of those bloody awful hospital dresses. He also discovered a red button on a sort of remote control next to him, and he pressed it.

“Ah, you’re awake”, a cheerful voice said not much later. It was doctor French. “How are you feeling?”

“What happened?” was the first thing he asked. He hated how tiny his voice sounded.

She sat down next to him. “Well, as it turns out… one of the drugs given to you during chemotherapy has caused some severe damage to your lungs. Once we know more, you will know. Bottom line is: we are keeping you here for a few weeks and you have to wear these…”, she straightened the tubes in his nose and ears, “for as long as we say so, so don’t throw them out or anything, all right?”

“How bad is it?” He was scared for the answer.

She sighed. “They did a blood test. They don’t know for certain yet, Vyvyan, but our best guess right now is pneumonia. It’s a lung infection. But it’s not… catastrophic. We’re treating you here and you should be able to go home in at least three weeks. Usually you can just take your medication at home, but since you have Hodgkin Lymphoma… the risks are a lot higher.”

He nodded understandingly, but he only got more questions.

“How did I pass out?”

“We think it’s because your brain didn’t get enough oxygen. You’ve only been out for a while, but you slept for a long time”.

He looked at her, and noticed she was looking particularly sad. Just when he wondered why, she said: “Your mum would hate seeing you like this”.

“Yeah”, he answered, hoping she wouldn’t get into the subject any further.

“They called her. She’s on her way”.

“What? Why!?” He immediately regretted shouting, because his lungs hurt.

“She’s your mother, Vyvyan. She deserves to know”. Now she just sounded like Rick. “Get some
rest”, she said in conclusion, and she stood up.

Before she turned to the door, she said: “By the way, your friends are still here. One of them has been very persistent about seeing you. You know, the skinny one with the pigtails? Should I tell them to come back tomorrow? When you’ve rested a bit more?”

He nodded. “Yeah”. The thought of seeing the others made him tired, especially all at once.

“Just a bastard you live with, isn’t he?” She said with a significant smile before leaving the room.

He had no time to dwell on what she meant by that. He thought of mum, and their small, shabby flat. The empty bottles on the table. It hadn’t been all that different from where he lived now, really. But to him it had made quite a bit of difference, actually. He thought of how happy he had been to exchange that shabby flat for the even shabbier student house he shared with Rick, Mike and Neil. Shabbiness had never bothered him much. They may have been poor, but mum had always made sure they had dinner on the table every evening. He’d never asked how she did it. Whenever someone visited them, she always said she was something different. Vyvyan himself had stopped asking when he was at an age he knew better. She may have been a shoplifter, but she took care of him.

So he hadn’t been an unhappy child or teenager. But he’d been glad to be moving on: out of the flat, to college, so he could show mum he could have a life away from what they had known. A different life. He didn’t know what exactly he had wanted her to see him become, but it wasn’t this. It wasn’t being sick and useless and not even being able to breath independently.

Mum was of course crying when she came in, and she made his face wet when she kissed him. He didn’t say anything, he just let her hold him while she cried and said: “Oh Vyvyan”, and “My boy”. He didn't even ask how ‘dad’ was.

He’d expected her to be angry he hadn’t told her, to yell at him like she usually did when he’d done something stupid, but she didn’t seem angry for one second. He’d never seen her this sad. Once she calmed down a little, he told her he was sorry he didn't call her, but that he’d lost her number and hadn’t known where she lived nowadays. He suspected she knew it was an excuse, but she took it.

She then started asking him all sorts of boring questions about his life: if he ate well, if his housemates took good care of him.

“Don’t worry mum”, he said. “They’re all taking perfect care of me. ‘Specially Rick”.

“That bastard you introduced me to in the pub?” She sounded surprised.

“Yeah”, he mumbled, thinking about how he’d squeezed his hand yesterday, feeling embarrassed. “That one”.

When she left, she gave him a dry kiss this time, promising she’d be back soon. He was already asleep before the click-clacking of her heels in the hallway had faded away.

Unsurprisingly, the first person to march into his room him next day was Rick.

“Hello, Vyvyan”, his housemate greeted him, sitting down next to him.

“Piss off”.

“Oh hah-hah-hah Vyvyan”, Rick answered. “Glad to see you still have the same smashing sense of humour”.

“O...
“I do actually!” Vyvyan grinned.

There was a bit of silence. “So, uh…” Rick looked down at his car keys and started fiddling with them. “How… how are you?”

“I’m in a hospital, and my lungs are such utter bollocks I can’t even breath for myself! How do you think I am Rick!?” Screaming still hurt, but it did make him feel a lot better.

Instead of yelling back, Rick just smiled nervously. “Sorry… that was… a stupid question, I….”

“I’ll probably be staying here for a couple of weeks”, Vyvyan interrupted him, a bit friendlier now. They exchanged a look that lasted a bit too long for comfort.

“Anyway, I brought you something”, Rick said, grabbing his bag and taking something out of it. It was a big pile of all of his war comics. “These are for you”.

“Really?” he asked in surprise, as Rick dropped them all in his lap. He knew how protective his housemate was of his war comics, even if he always pretended to hate them, so this was some kind of great gesture for Rick.

“I’ve grown over them, anyway. It’s time for me to be moving on to more important lecture”, he said with a dramatic sigh. "Besides, I don’t think it’s very wevolutionary to be reading about wars".

They then engaged in a long conversation about which comics they thought were the best of the collection, and disagreed on almost everything. Vyvyan of course preferred the ones that had the most explosions, and Rick the ones where peace was brought by a hero, and then they had a discussion about whether peace was poofy or not, and they’d had this discussion before, but he kept talking because he realized he really, really didn’t want him to leave. Maybe Rick didn’t want to leave either, because he didn’t leave until the nurse told him Vyvyan really had to get some rest now.

“See you later then, Vyvyan”, Rick said as he got his bag and stood up.

“See ya, poof”.

He spent reading the comics for the rest of the afternoon and evening. It occurred to him how all the heroes dying in it died heroically in a battle. And he thought about how people always talked about having cancer as a battle, about ‘fighting’ it, but there weren’t any comics on heroes dying of cancer. He didn’t feel like he was fighting. He didn’t feel like he was doing much of anything except not trying to become too sad or scared.

The next day, it was Neil who came to visit him. He brought him a Walkman and a mixtape full of hippie music for him to listen to, like Janis Joplin and Cat Stevens. It wasn’t exactly his style, but he said thanks anyway.

It was confirmed a few days later he had, indeed, pneumonia. The drug that had caused it was called bleomycin, Doctor Richardson told him, and it was taken out of his chemo cocktail. Pneumonia was more often a side effect of either the cancer or the treatment, and it was essential to try and cure it as fast as possible, since he was in a critical position. Side effects aside, he still had stage four Hodgkin’s. Which was rubbish. So he would get extra aggressive treatment, probably antibiotics. The chemotherapy was given to him in his room, so he wouldn’t have to move. For the first time, the anti-anxiety drugs were a relief. It was nice being able to drift away and not having to think about everything for a minute. Sleeping became his most common pastime.

He got at least a visitor a day, (usually Rick) and quite some presents as well. Mike brought him a book. (The Little Black Book of Improvised Explosives) Helen brought him the second season of the
Bastard Squad. It wasn’t too bad, really, but in the end he was bloody bored. He was even more bored than he usually was, at home. But he counted the days to get back there.
It was a very boring day in the house of the four students - now temporarily reduced to three. Even more boring than usual. He’d given all his comics away and Vyvyan was still in the bloody hospital. He’d always found Vyvyan disturbing the peace and quiet with his violent nonsense annoying, but not having him around was also kind of… weird. It had been two weeks now since he was hospitalized, and he would be for least for another week. Things had become slightly more peaceful in their household, but also much more boring. Rick sat on the couch, staring into nothingness.

“God, I wonder how bored Vyvyan must be, lying awound in the same woom all day, tied to all these machines”, he sighed dramatically. “He must be even more bored than we are!”

“Well at least he has a couple of hot birds to take care of him every day”, Mike commented from behind his paper. “That’s more than we can say”.

“Yeah, that’s true”, Rick had to admit, although he didn’t exactly like the thought of Vyvyan being surrounded by hot birds.

Neil, who was sitting on the floor, cutting out shapes from origami paper, didn’t comment.

“What are you doing, Neil?” Rick scorned. “Making a bit of art nouveau, are you?”

“It’s for Vyvyan”, Neil said. “I’m making him a postcard, right. And I’m making all of us out of origami paper and then glue them of the card, right. It’s like, completely self-made and everything. Look, I’ll show you”. He searched through the pile of paper and held up a cut out little figure with a blue jacket and orange, spunky hair. “This is Vyv”.

Rick stared at it. “Why has it got hair?”

“What do you mean?” Neil asked, confused.

“That one has hair. Vyvyan doesn’t have any hair, does he? He’s lost it all because he’s sick! Have a bit of wespect, Neil”.

“I know that, Rick!” Neil called out. “I’m just…”

“Guys, guys!” Mike shouted. They were quiet immediately. “What do you say we go see Vyv, huh?”

In a just few minutes they all stood by the car, and after Rick and Neil had a fight about who had to sit in the back-seat, (Neil lost) they had a silent drive to the hospital. Rick was confused. On one hand, he was very happy to see Vyvyan again. On the other hand, he would never get used to seeing the punk like that.

They had went to see him every other day. This was better because he needed to sleep a lot. Most of the time, they went to see him with the three of them, but he’d gone a couple of times by himself as well. Vyvyan usually complained about how bored he was and Rick bought him more comics to read when he’d finished the old ones. They still never agreed on what made for a good story, but there were other things they did agree on. They both hated Thatcher, for instance, and they both disliked Neil.

One time, he’d found Vyvyan’s mother sitting by Vyvyan’s side as he was sleeping, and she had stood up to leave as he’d entered the room. But before she’d went out, she’d came up to him and hugged him.

“Thanks for everything”, she’d said.

Rick thought he was usually very well-spoken and smart, but he’d had no idea what to say back. He’d muttered something about ‘welcome Mrs. Vyvyan’.

He remembered the day he first met Vyvyan pretty clearly. He’d been sixteen, and Vyvyan being one year older than him, had been seventeen. They were still in secondary school. He had been on his way to his usual solitary spot in the study room, because that’s where he always went when he had some time in between classes. He had no friends to hang out with at the time, just this one upper-class boy Henry he sometimes had lunch with. It didn’t matter to him, his classmates were all stupid anyway. They weren’t smart and poetic like him. He was going to achieve big things. Mummy had said so.

So on the day he met Vyvyan, he was on his way to the study room. When he passed the principal’s office, he discovered a ginger haired boy in an oversized Ramones shirt and torn jeans thumping his head against the wall. His hair was very red and very wavy (no Mohawk yet). Rick stood there watching the strange boy repeatedly bashing his face against the wall for a while, wondering if he should say something.

“Excuse me”, he said after maybe two minutes, “I don’t mean to bother or anything, but are you aware you are looking quite stupid?”

The boy stopped and quickly turned his head. When he saw who was standing in front of him, he walked up to him and took on an aggressive pose. “What do YOU want, you spotty bastard?” His voice was the shrillest and loudest voice he had ever heard.

“Er… Well… I was just saying… you were looking a bit silly”.

The other boy seemed to be considering this for a moment. “Why should I care?”

Rick tried to collect his thoughts for a proper response, when the ginger boy interrupted him. “Hang on”, he’d said, pointing at him. “I know who you are. You’re that complete bastard from my English class”.
After a moment of thought, it slowly dawned to him. He had seen this boy before: he sat in front of him and was always laughing about stupid things with his mates.

“You must have mistaken me for someone else”, Rick said. He knew most people in English class couldn’t stand him, but he didn’t necessarily want to admit that to this strange boy. It was hardly his fault he was so much more developed and intellectual than the others.

“Nah, it’s you!” The other boy exclaimed. “You’re the one who always writes all those poofy poems! All my mates think you’re a twat!” He grinned.

Rick raised his chin. “You’re just jealous because I’m better at English than you!”

“Aha!” The boy shouted. “So it is you then!”

“No”, Rick lied. “I just said that because I’m better at English than everyone!”

That seemed to peak the other boy’s interest in him. “How good?” he asked, in a different tone.

“Very good, better than all the others”, Rick bluffed. “Why, I don’t assume you need help, do you?”. The boy nodded, staring at his shoes, looking suddenly small. “I just had a talk with the principal. They’re going to kick me out if I don’t pass. This is already my second time doing the year, so…”

Rick was suddenly bored with this conversation. “Well that’s very unfortunate and everything, but I’m afraid it’s none of my business. So if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way”, he said, turning away.

“Not so fast, bum face!”, The boy had said, grabbing the back of his jacket. Rick didn’t like to be touched by strangers or pushed around, but he didn’t know how to fight, so he just slapped him in the face like a girl.

“Is that all you've got, you girl?” The ginger said, and punched him on the jaw so fast he didn’t even have time to try to avoid his fist. In response, Rick jumped and threw his whole weight at the other boy, in the hopes of knocking him over. It worked, but not without receiving the boy’s knee in his bollocks. He squealed like a pig.

A spectacle of kicking, punching, rolling and even some hair pulling emerged. Thankfully, all the other children were in the cafeteria, so no one was there to see it but a group of hippies who strolled by. No one cared about them anyway.

“Hey!” A voice called out. It was the principal. “You two! In my office, right now!”

No matter how rebellious they both pretended to be, when the principal commanded them like that, they listened. So they sat next to each other in the sober office a moment later. They both looked beaten up, but it was painfully obvious who was the winner. The ginger boy’s hair looked rough and the collar of his shirt was ripped, but his face was pretty much unharmed. Rick could already feel his eye and his cheek swelling up. Mummy and daddy would disapprove of this, he thought.

“Basterd, I never liked you, so I didn’t expect any better from you”, the principal started. “Pratt… I don’t really like you, either, but at least you normally behave. What’s gotten into you?”

Both of them started shouting and blaming each other, when the principal silenced them. They both got detention for two weeks. None of them protested.

“All right, I’ll make you a deal”, the ginger boy said when they stood outside of the office again.
“You help me with English during detention, and I’ll pay you… “ he grabbed some money out of his pockets, “ten quid”.

Rick snatched the money out of his hands. “Fine”, he sighed after a moment of consideration.

The boy smiled. “Great! I'm Vyvyan by the way”.

“I’m Wick”.

“Wrick?”

“No, Wick, you see, with an R”.

Vyvyan shook his head. “Well never mind, I don’t need to know your name anyway. I can just call you poof.”

“So, uhm, when do you want to meet?” Rick asked.

“Next week?”

Rick nodded.

“Don’t tell anyone about this or I’ll bash your face in”’, Vyvyan said, and he walked away.

For two weeks, they had spent every afternoon together in detention, but had never really become friends. Vyvyan had made sure of the fact that Rick had never mistook their relationship for anything other than strictly professional, and Rick had accepted this. He didn’t need friends that were stupid bastards. But even though he would never have admitted it out loud, he’d kind of enjoyed the whirlwind that was Vyvyan’s presence. Although -needless to be said- he’d had the attention span of a fly and teaching him English had went hand in hand with a lot of sighing and saying how bored he was, at least he wasn’t as boring as most of his classmates. Outside of detention, though, they’d stayed away from each other. And when they had served their time, that had seemed to be the end of their temporary ‘bond’, or whatever it was.

So it was all the more ironic they’d coincidentally moved into the same student house four years later. Despite being older, they’d pretty much picked up where they had left. Rick thought he was an idiot, and Vyvyan thought he was a poof and a bastard. That was how it had always been. That was how it always would be. Or so he’d thought. Everything was weird these days.

Vyvyan’s room was at the end of the hallway on the ICU. They already kind of knew their way around in the hospital, and were greeted by some of the staff.

“Hi boys”, Helen said with a smile, as she came out of his room.

“Afternoon ma’am”, Mike said with a small bow. “How is he?”

Helen sighed. “He’s had a rough night. He had his chemo yesterday and he’s had quite the night sweat. He’s been throwing up a lot. The good news is: he seems to be responding well to the lung treatment, and we expect him to be ready to go home soon”.

This relieved Rick more than he let on.

“The bad news is… you know how he’s been having trouble eating lately?”

They all nodded.
“Well, his stomach seems unable of processing food, it all comes back out. So we are currently feeding him through a tube. We think he may need start using it at home as well.”

A feeding tube? It made him feel a bit sick. The idea of Vyvyan not being able to eat by himself was ridiculous.

“Also, he had a bit of an episode this afternoon: he tried to pull out some of his IV lines”.

“Can we see him?” Rick asked impatiently.

“Yes, I think that’d be fine. He just had a nap, so he should be fine to talk to you for… an hour?”

“Hey there Vyv”, Mike said, as he sat down next to him. There was a tube attached to the crook of his elbow, attached with a big white plaster.

“Hi Mike”, the punk said. He tried to grin and seem confident, but Rick could tell he was tired.

“Why’d you bring those bastards?” He nodded to Rick and Neil.

“Shut up, Vyvyan”, Rick said.

“Guys!” Mike interrupted. “Let’s not fight now, all right? We’ve only got an hour”. He shot Rick a glance and turned back to Vyvyan. “So Vyv, I heard you tried to break out today”.

“Yeah”, Vyvyan grinned. “I got very very bored”.

“Just another week, Vyv, and you’ll be out of here”, Mike said reassuringly.

Vyvyan didn’t answer for a moment. He looked a bit sad, and for a moment Rick thought he was going to cry. He didn’t. “Did you feed Special Patrol Group?” he asked instead.

“I did, because no one else ever does anything…” Neil said.

They talked and gave him all sorts of things they had taken for him. Crossword puzzles, today’s paper, Neil’s ridiculous card… Neil had also taken him a small bag of cinnamon sticks. Since Vyvyan had trouble eating, it really was the perfect candy, since he could just suck on them. He was visibly enjoying it, and he seemed to become a bit more energetic. Helen even let them stay for an extra twenty minutes, but then they really had to go. Mike pulled Vyvyan into a short hug before they left, and for a split second, Rick considered doing the same. But he just said: “Bye, Vyvyan. See you soon”.

“See ya, poof”.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Some sad moments. Some hope.

Chapter Notes

Because of my long hiatus and the previous chapter that wasn't that eventful, here's another one.

He hated it: the boredom, the food that wasn’t food but bags of liquid, the smell of the hospital and the metallic smell that came with the chemo. He hated not being able to do anything by himself and lying in bed like a bloody child. He felt most embarrassed every time he had to go to the toilet. Since he was dependent on the oxygen tank for the first two weeks in the hospital, he couldn’t go to the bathroom and a nurse needed to help him through a bedpan, which was basically a potty for adults. He hated this even more when the nurse talked to him in an overly Cheerful Voice like he wasn’t twenty-two years old and hadn’t learned how to piss in a potty ten years ago.

It was hard to keep up the act of being nice and polite when a nurse told him to please lift up his buttocks in a honey-sweet voice. So it happened on occasion he responded shouting something among the lines of: “YES, I KNOW HOW TO USE MY BOTTOM!”

There were some nice nurses, though, of which Helen was his favourite. She joked around with him and never belittled him. He knew that in any other situation, he probably would have fancied her. But he was here, in the stupid hospital.

The only things he did like about being in the hospital were Helen and the frequent visits of doctor French and his friends. He’d never thought seeing Rick or Neil would fill him with feelings that were other than disgust and disdain, but he had sunken so low that it was in fact the highlight of his week.

All the rest of it was so awfully, mind-numbingly dull he often thought even being dead must be more interesting. He had Rick’s comics, Neil’s hippie music tape he’d listened to so often by now he knew all the songs by heart and even sang along quietly sometimes, and he had Mike’s book about explosives he read at least 10 pages a day of. So he had things to distract him. He just wasn’t used to lying still for days on end.

A few days ago, he had become so bloody sick of it he decided to just try and go for the obvious route: violently trying to escape.

With determined force, he’d ripped off his IV lines and stumbled out of bed, but he hadn’t even made it out of the room. A nurse had caught him and he’d simply been too tired to fight back when she’d guided him back to his bed. Even if he hadn’t, he realized there was simply no way around this.

It was a relief when he got moved from the ICU to the regular hospital floor. His lungs were getting better and he slowly regained his ability to breathe independently, until he only needed oxygen at night and parts of the day.
It had been lonely on the ICU, and he was glad he was able to see and talk to other patients. They put him in a room next to a young boy with leukemia: a talkative little chap who introduced himself as Humphrey and asked Vyvyan lots of questions. How old he was, what he was in the hospital for, if he was in school. He learned Humphrey was fourteen, had had cancer since he was nine and was in an adult hospital for an operation.

For a few days, Humphrey was his little mate. He even played a game of “I spy with my little eye” with Rick when his housemates came to visit. Rick was delighted he had found someone to play his stupid games with, and Humphrey was amusing himself trying to make the game as hard as possible. It was obvious Rick was sometimes pretending not being able to guess the object, (“Oh dear me, I have no idea what it is, do you Neil?”) but it worked for Humphrey. Although Vyvyan thought his ‘acting’ was bollocks, he liked watching Rick interact with the boy. He’d never seen this side of him before: kind and playful, actually trying to get along with someone and, well, basically: not being a bastard.

The morning after that, he woke up to find the boy gone. The faces of the nurses when he asked them where he went told him all he needed to know. It was the first moment since the diagnose he cried. Not just the silent-tears-dripping-down-cheeks type of crying, either. He was a howling, blubbering mess. When he’d been crying for maybe five minutes, Doctor French came to his side to pull him into her arms. He wetted half of her shirt. She muttered these meaningless little sounds and words you say to a person who’s crying, like “sssshh” and “I know”, which he'd always found poofy, but it was actually a little soothing.

Rick, Mike and Neil came to see him the next day. Someone must have told them what happened, because they were all in a rather depressed mood when they came in. For Neil, this kind of behaviour was normal, but it wasn’t for Rick and Neil .

None of them mentioned the elephant in the room, but they were all thinking about it as they tried to make casual conversation.

When they said goodbye after their awkward meeting, Rick visibly hesitated and leant forward slightly, as if he considered hugging him. But then he straightened his back and just said goodbye. Vyvyan stared as he walked out.

Having cancer was bollocks. He’d figured that much. But having someone in his direct environment die had been a sort of a wake-up call. This disease could kill him. He knew his suffering was far from over, but he was alive. And he did not want to die.

On Thursday morning, he woke up from Helen entering. “Time for your feeding session, love”.

“You’re late”, Vyvyan commented.

“Yeah well, we had a patient with an infected G-tube. How are you feeling after tonight?” she asked, while attaching the bag of food to his IV pole. “Still feverish?”

“Nah. Just tired and bored”.

She sighed, sitting down next to him. “It’s rough, isn’t it?”

“Yeah”.

“I know”, she said, looking at him with a sad face, and he believed she meant it. She didn’t just say it to comfort him. “I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about that. You seem to have great friends, though. You’re very lucky with that”.

“Ah, Rick’s not my friend”, he corrected her. He really didn’t understand why everyone kept
mistaking them for friends when he so obviously despised the bastard.

“Oh come on, Vyvyan”. She grinned. “He likes you, you know”.

Vyvyan made a disgusted face. “Are you trying to make me sick again?”

“And you like him”, Helen teased.

“No I don’t! He’s a complete bastard and I hate him”.

She pulled up her eyebrows, but still smiled. “All right, if you say so”. She got up.

“Come on, let’s feed you. Up you sit”, she said, and he propped himself up on his elbows while she made sure his head was supported by his pillow. He’d been fed like this for a week now, and the whole thing still seemed very strange to him. He just had to sit still for about half an hour while nutrition’s flowed from a bag through a tube into his nose, and from his nose into his stomach. It was the most boring way to eat he could think of, but he had no choice. It was either this or throwing up all over his bed sheets again. That wasn’t very appealing either.

“You look well!” she said after the feeding session. She looked almost proud. “We have a meeting with your medical team tomorrow and we’ll talk about when we can get you home”.

The meeting meant they would talk about if the chemotherapy was working and if the cancer had shrunk, stayed the same or grown. His mum would also there when the Doctor would tell him, which made him feel slightly uncomfortable.

“Good to see you, Vyvyan”, Doctor Richardson said with an abundant smile, giving him a hand with a powerful grip. Everything about him radiated Health and Authority, but for some reason, he always made Vyvyan feel like he was the most important person in the room.

“It’s good to see you too, doctor”, he said in his most polite way of talking.

“Mrs. Basterd, always a pleasure”, he said, moving onto Mum.

“Oh, no, the pleasure’s all mine”, she said, and smiled in a way that made Vyvyan suspect she would like to have it off with him at any other place or time. He knew how mum was in relation to men.

The doctor sat down. “Well, let’s get down to it, shall we?”

Mum nodded. Her face turned suddenly grim, as if she suddenly remembered she wasn’t here to chat with handsome doctors.

“It’s good news!” Doctor Richardson said. “You’re almost cured from your Pneumonia. You’re off the oxygen tank for the most part, that’s truly fantastic. The other good news is… the tumors haven’t grown. Your cancer is stable.”

His first reaction was relief, and Mum smiled. “Well that’s great, isn’t it?”

“Ah, Doctor?” Vyvyan asked. “That means they also haven’t shrunk, then, doesn’t it?”

“That’s right. I know this may not sound like good news, but as your doctor I would like to assure you our medical team definitely considers this good news. We think you’re well enough to go home tomorrow”, doctor Richardson said. “We think it’s best to keep on the same track and continue the treatment as it is”.

“How long?” Vyvyan asked.
“We’re doing another cycle of chemotherapy, and see how the tumors have responded in three months”.

Both Vyvyan and Mum nodded seriously. After his initial relief, he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to think. He supposed it was better than hearing the treatment wasn’t working, but practically speaking nothing had changed. He was still carrying the same amount of the stupid cancer inside of his body than he did on the day of the diagnose. Was that good? He didn’t know.

When Doctor Richardson stood up to leave, he patted Vyvyan on the shoulder. “Don’t give up, Vyvyan. You’re doing extremely well and you have a very good chance of complete recovery”.

*Yeah, they say that a lot,* he thought.

He turned to Mum. “Mrs. Basterd, I hope this has been able to put your mind at ease for now?”

“Yes, yes, thank you Doctor”, she nodded.

“That’s a remarkable son you have ma’am”, he said in conclusion, and although it sounded like a compliment, Vyvyan wondered if he had gotten wind of his sometimes rather rebellious behaviour.

After Doctor Richardson had left, Mum stayed with him for a while.

“You can always come home with me, you know”, she said, caressing the smooth and hairless surface of his head.

“Nah”, he answered. “I’m going home with the lads, if that’s okay mum”.

She smiled. “Of course. It’s just… oh never mind. But they’re just children, Vyvyan. Don’t you think it’s a big responsibility for them to take care of you?”

“Nah… we’re all right”. He wished she would drop it.

“Okay dear. It’s your decision. Well, I should go. Behave yourself!”

“Okay mum”.

She promised to visit him at his house soon, which he wasn’t particularly looking forward to, but the idea of being back in the shabby student house seemed like heaven at the moment. He asked a nurse for a phone and called home to tell them he was being released tomorrow. Of course it had to be Rick that picked up.

“Hello this is Wick”.

“Rick, I’m being released tomorrow, so come get me, you bastard”.

“Oh it’s you, Vyvyan!” There seemed to be a hint of relief in his voice. “H… how are you?”

“You just saw me yesterday, Rick! Just come and get me tomorrow, okay?” And he hung up.

It was early in the afternoon when the arrival of his three housemates woke him up. Or, more specifically: Rick’s loud and annoying voice reverberating through the room.

“Up, up Vyvyan! Come on! We don’t have all day, do we now?”

“Piss off”, he snarled, but feeling secretly relieved.
They’d brought his clothes in a plastic bag. It was a good feeling to put on his usual jeans, shirt and Heavy Metal jacket. He studied himself in the mirror of the bathroom. Bald head. Puffy cheeks. Still, he had looked worse.

The nurses helped with getting all the medical equipment for his feeding tube into the car. Then Helen gave him a hug (there was far too much hugging these days) and waved goodbye before going back inside.

Then he sat there. In the car. In his normal clothes. With his housemates. It was weird, but that felt really really great.

“So, where are we going?” Rick asked excitedly.

“What do you mean Rick? Aren’t we going home?” Mike said.

“Well, aren’t we going to celebrate?” Rick sounded just a tad offended this wasn’t immediately obvious to Mike.

“Yeah, right! Vyvyan’s finally home, we should celebrate, yes, of course…!” Neil agreed. “We should go to the mall!”

“Neil, you rarely have good ideas, but I quite like that one”, Mike said.

“TO THE MALL!” Vyvyan shouted.

So they drove to the mall and had ice-cream, even Vyvyan. Some people stared at his tube, but he just stared back or asked them what they were looking at. After a while of walking around annoying shop owners, Vyvyan started to get quite tired. So Mike went into the supermarket and came back with a shopping cart. “Hop aboard, Vyv”.

He climbed in and Rick came in behind him. They yelled in unison as Mike and Neil brought the cart into motion. Rick grabbed Vyvyan’s arm and his stomach pressed against his back in a position that he might have found a little too intimate otherwise. But he didn’t care now. He just laughed as they raced through the mall.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the long wait! Reviews would be greatly appreciated!

Rick often thinks about that afternoon in the mall. It was one of those days when everything seemed all right. When he had believed everything would be all right. He had to believe that.

He wasn’t able to keep from falling when the shopping cart hit the wall and tilted sideways. They both managed to break their fall with their hands, and Rick already crawled up. Vyvyan was still on the ground. Without hesitation, he reached him a hand and helped him up. Vyvyan had to catch his breath for a while, standing almost nose to nose with him. Being this close up into Vyvyan’s personal space should have made him feel uneasy. But instead of taking a step back, he just kind of stared into his eyes a little.

“All right boys, enough playing around for today”, Mike said.

They left the stolen shopping car somewhere in the bushes on their way out, and Mike had suggested they go eat a hamburger in one of the local beaneries close to the mall. Vyvyan, who couldn’t eat food, only ate some fries. Rick wasn’t hungry either, though. Maybe because of the fall, he wasn’t quite sure.

“Are you going to eat that Rick?” Vyvyan asked, looking at his half-eaten hamburger.

“Hang on, I will!” Rick snarled. With hot cheeks, he took another bite of his sandwich. He didn’t know why this was making him so uncomfortable, but he wanted Vyvyan to stop looking at him and his sandwich. He had no business with it.

“You know what I think?” Vyvyan said a few minutes later.

“No, Vyvyan, and I don’t care”, Rick said after swallowing a piece of hamburger.

Vyvyan ignored him. “I think… we should go celebrate in the pub!” He looked around the table in excitement.

Rick shot him a look that was meant to say don’t be stupid, but then he remembered he had been in the hospital for three weeks.

“Isn’t it like, very dangerous to drink while you’re on chemo, Vyv?” Neil wanted to know, looking concerned.

“The doctor said I can drink moderate amounts of alcohol”, Vyvyan explained smugly.

“Well, it’s your day, Vyv. Where do you wanna go?” Mike asked.

One pub, eight beers and half an hour of street wandering later, Rick was staring at a couple of bouncing breasts in a tiny bikini and a few other girls dancing around poles in equally skimpy outfits. A place like this was supposed to be heaven. He wasn’t amusing himself, though. Most girls paid attention to Mike, and, to Rick’s surprise, Vyvyan. Either way, him and Neil were mainly ignored.
after having had their obligatory lap dance. They sat with their arms crossed at an empty table, watching the girls from a distance.

“Now I know what it must be like to be you, Neil”, Rick said.

“What do you mean ‘to be me’?” Neil sounded offended.

“Well, you never get any birds, do you?”

“You never get any birds either, Rick!” Neil exclaimed.

Rick shot him a sideways glance. “Of course I do, don’t be stupid. Anyway, Vyvyan probably gets all the attention because he looks sick and they pity him”.

Neil didn’t say anything. His eyes shifted to the stage, where a tall, heavily make-upped girl with long black hair took her position. She narrowed her eyes and scanned the room, when her gaze rested on Vyvyan.

“Vyvyan?” she called, smiling, and walked up to him.

To say Rick was surprised would be an understatement. Since when did Vyvyan know a stripper? The punk greeted her with a smile that was a bit too eager for Rick’s taste, and the girl sat down next to him. He tried to make out what was being said, but could only catch bits and pieces.

“… you been? I’ve tried calling you, but…”

“Whoa, look at that”, Neil commented, sounding impressed. “There’s a girl flirting with Vyvyan!”

He wondered why Neil put so much emphasis on the word girl. What did he expect: for a boy to flirt with Vyvyan? Ridiculous.

“Yes I can see that Neil, thank you very much for informing me”, he said, feeling annoyed for some reason. “For Chwist’s sake, how does he do it?”

Even Mike, who always had had confidence in Vyvyan’s ability to score with the ladies –because he taught him how- was surprised.

“Tell me guys: are those pills making me hallucinate, or is there a stripper coming onto Vyv?” he asked after he’d had a lap dance and rejoined their table.

“You’re not hallucinating, Mike”, Rick said, still annoyed.

“Any idea who she might be?”

Neil shook his head, but Rick suddenly remembered something. “Last month, when we sat in the garden”, he said. “Vyvyan mentioned meeting a girl in the pub”. He looked over at them. “He never said she was a stripper, though”.

“Well, looks like he got lucky”, Mike said with a smile. Somehow, Mike’s smile annoyed Rick even more.

God, he thought as he watched Vyvyan talking to the stripper girl. This is just nauseating. All of it. The girl touching his arm, their disgusting smiles; the whole thing was bloody revolting to look at. They were acting so revoltingly he was surprised they didn’t just shag right on the table. Besides, he didn’t for the life of him understand what this girl would ever see in Vyvyan.
For what seemed ages, they waited for the girl to stand up and return to her job. When she finally did, she kissed Vyvyan on the cheek. Rick almost spat out his drink.

“Got yourself a girlfiend, Vyvyan?” he asked as Vyvyan got back to their table.

“Why do you care, girly?”

“Well I didn’t say that I care now, did I? If you think I’m only the slightest bit interested in your love life, you might want to weconsider”.

Vyvyan sat down and took a sip of his beer. “Good!”

On the way home, Neil and Mike were full of questions about the girl. Rick pretended not to listen, but overheard everything as he kept his eyes on the road. Vyvyan told them her name was Sharon. She was a stripper, but went to the same college as them. They met last month in the pub… Rick didn’t particularly want to hear this. He turned on his Cliff Richard cassette and made everyone listen to Devil Woman for the rest of the drive.

Thankfully, they were all tired by the time they were home, and the buzz around the girl had slowly subsided. It didn’t make him feel better though.

Vyvyan quickly got ready for sleep, after they helped him set up all the medical equipment. There was a whole corner in the living room now that was just for him. Basically, it still wasn’t much different from the hospital. There was a bed, his IV pole and an oxygen tank. Despite earlier success, the Doctor had warned them Vyvyan’s oxygen levels were still very low, and he needed oxygen at night. This resulted in a lot of frustration from Vyvyan’s side, because he had hoped to be able to smoke again.

“God, these bloody lungs”, Vyvyan complained the next morning, when he walked to the breakfast table, dragging his IV pole with him. ”I might as well rip them out and donate them to science for a lot of money”.

“Nobody wants your lungs, Vyvyan”, Rick commented.

“Why not?”

“Because they’re not exactly useful, are they!” He knew he was being nasty, but he still felt a bit of bitterness about last night.

“That’s what makes them good for science!”, the punk said. “You could do all sorts of experiments on them! They’re full of cancer anyway”.

“That’s incwedibly unethical, Vyvyan”.

Vyvyan grabbed the spoon Rick was eating muesli with and smacked him on the head with it. “Shut up, you girl”.

It was like he had never left.

Routine quickly took over with Vyvyan back home. Life carried on. The punk spent most of his time lying in bed or on the couch, and they tried to assist him where they could. Then there was also college. Vyvyan had been homeschooled for a while, which he didn’t mind that much. He’d never been a very devoted student when he was healthy. The same went for Rick, but there had been a change lately. He actually did homework these days. Like he’d suddenly realized being a student wasn’t just about waiting for time to pass until you were grown up. You had to do actual things to
get there. It may be boring and all schools were run by fascists, but what other option did he have? Dropping out and going on a world trip to go and find his inner self? He couldn’t do that now. Vyvyan needed him.

The new chemo cycle started a week after their night in the strip club. After the first session, Vyvyan was bedridden with high fever for four days straight. Neil and him did most of the nursing, like changing his food bags and wetting him with a washcloth when he was sweating. Vyvyan mostly slept. There wasn’t much else he could do.

During these days, it was hard for all of them to see the end of it. Rick wondered if the others had the same question on their minds: if things would ever turn back to normal again. Because even though they tried, nothing about this was normal.

There were moments when Vyvyan was angry. Angry at his body for not being able to do everything he wanted, angry at the hospital for not having a cure that didn’t make him sicker than he already was. He once yelled in a fit that he was never going back to the hospital, that he’d rather die than having that poison pumped into his veins again. That those bastards might as well just kill him now, it would save them a lot of trouble. His fits they could handle though. Mike would tell him to go cool off outside and the punk would kick the front door for about ten minutes, and he’d come back more or less calmed down.

Worse were the moments were when he was sad rather than angry. Much like his outbursts of anger, his emotional breakdowns were mostly random and could be triggered by anything. In his second month of chemo, they were watching a movie that was shot in the desert of America, and Vyvyan started crying. After they’d repeatedly asked him what was wrong, he answered that he’d never even been out of England. And if things would go bad, he might never see another country.

“Vyv, that’s the worst-case scenario”, Mike would tell him. “Things are not going to go bad. They won’t let it”.

Rick wondered if that was true. He knew there were people that the hospital couldn’t save. They hadn’t been able to save his uncle Harry. But Vyvyan couldn’t be like uncle Harry. He couldn’t imagine any other outcome for him than to be healthy and fine again. Yet, there was always that little voice nagging in the back of all his mind.

It was always a week after chemo when Vyvyan had his good days and things were most tolerable. Vyvyan was more mobile, and they could take a step back and create some space for themselves. They filled their days with doing homework, sitting around being bored, playing monopoly, reading, quarrelling and watching TV.

It was five weeks since Vyvyan had come home when they were sitting in front of the telly. Just him and Vyvyan, like old times. Vyvyan was fidgeting with his IV pole for his evening feeding session.

“Do you need a hand with that, Vyvyan?” Rick asked.

“I can do it myself”, Vyvyan mumbled.

He attached the food bag, and they stared at the telly. That ridiculous program Nozin’ Around was on. Rick hated this show. He hoped the presenter would ride himself off a cliff on those stupid roller skates.

“God, can you believe these fascists”, he said.

Vyvyan was silent, and they just watched the stupid presenter riding on his roller skates and talking rubbish for a while.
“I’m taking her out”, Vyvyan said suddenly.

“What?” Rick turned to look at him.

“Me and Sharon, we’re going out”.

This information confused him for a second. “What, the stwipper? You’re going to go out with a stwipper?” He couldn’t hide the disdain in his voice.

“I know how you feel about strippers, Rick. But what’s wrong with going on a date with one?”

“Well, nothing, but…”, Rick felt his stomach turning. “But you have…”

“Look”, Vyvyan said. “I’m going to be in this situation for a while. It could be ages for all they know. So I might as well just start living my bloody life, all right?”

He simply couldn’t think of a clever response to that, so he said: “I suppose you’re right”.

That was all they said on the matter. But the knot in his stomach wouldn’t leave him. It didn’t leave him when they said goodnight that evening, it didn’t leave him when he went to bed, and it hadn’t left when he woke up the next morning. He couldn’t stop thinking about the date. Wondering what it would be like. What would a date with Vyvyan look like? Going to a punk rock concert? Molest a squatted house? Whatever it was, it was probably stupid.

And yet… he couldn’t stop imagining it. All day long, he couldn’t stop picturing Vyvyan and the stripper girl being somewhere, having a good time and being revoltingly happy together. At a certain point, they turned into daydreams, and it wasn’t even the girl he was thinking of anymore. He was just imagining a blank person that could be anyone, really, and how Vyvyan would treat that person. A person he liked, a person he actually fancied. How different would it be?

He was still thinking about it when he was lying in bed that night. Since sleep wasn’t going to happen anytime soon, he slipped out of bed, put on his bathrobe, and snuck downstairs. The earth under his feet was still wet from the rain when he walked into the garden. He shivered. Why hadn’t he thought of putting on some bloody shoes? He was just about to sit down, when he jumped. There was already someone sitting there.

“Oh, hello Rick”.

“For God’s sake Neil! You nearly gave me a heart attack! What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?”

“I do this every night, Rick. I watch the stars and reflect on the futility of my own existence”.

“Oh”, was all Rick could think of to say. “I suppose that’s all right then”.

“What are you doing here, Rick?” Neil asked, as Rick sat down next to him in the dirty sand. “I’ve never seen you here before”.

“Oh, I just… needed a bit of fresh air, you know”.

But Neil studied his face. “Is this about Vyvyan?”

He felt himself stiffen. “Yes – no! I don’t know what you’re talking about”.

The hippie just sighed and looked up at the sky. “Listen, Rick, I don’t mean to intrude on like, your personal business or anything, okay, but if you fancy Vyv, you should, like, tell him”.
“Neil, I don’t know what you’ve been smoking, but I can assure you this is a misunderstanding. I don’t fancy Vyvyan. But – why do you reckon?”


“I’m sorry, what?”

“Are you telling me you didn’t know that?” Neil asked in disbelief.

“Of… of course I knew!” he lied, and he just stared at the sky like this was completely old news to him.

He didn’t sleep at all that night.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Yay for more Vyvyan's mom. Also Vyvyan has a date. Rick doesn't like it much.

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the long wait. I had real-life stuff to do. It always gets in the way! To make it up here's an extra long chapter.

“Isn’t it about time you got up?”

Rick was rummaging about in the kitchen. Vyvyan knew what he was doing, it was the same as every morning. He was making him his special healthy drink. All the ingredients had been discussed and improved by his doctor, and their fridge had changed from having tinned, mostly expired food to having tons of vitamin drinks. He wasn’t sure if they were actually helping, but he assumed it gave Rick the feeling he was helping him in some way. He had given up on protesting to it. Although he hated it to be nursed by Rick of all people, there was little he could do or say that would stop him, and he supposed extra vitamins couldn’t hurt.

The reason Rick was asking him this question is because he was still lying in bed at thirty past one in the afternoon. He didn’t see the point of getting up, really.

This was how he spent most of his days: sleeping in late, being woken up by Rick or Neil, getting dressed, feeding, doing homework, watching the telly, feeding again, more telly…

“He’s just saving up energy for his date tonight, Rick, he’ll need a lot of it”, Mike commented.

“Oh, right!” Neil exclaimed. “You’ve got a date! With the stripper!”

Rick ignored this. “Yes, well, I’m sure he didn’t mean sleep until you’ve wasted half the day, did he?” he said, stirring the drink.

“The day’s only just started hasn’t it?” Vyvyan was annoyed. His mum did come to visit. He’d almost forgot about that.

“It’s thirty past one, Vyvyan, I wouldn’t exactly call that the start of the day…”

“Oh shut up”. He got up and seated himself on the edge of his bed. It was time he got dressed. He usually just slept in the same shirt he also wore beneath his Very Metal jacket. Neil had washed that one yesterday though, so right now he was wearing an old faded grey shirt that said ‘Rock ‘N Roll’. He took off his shirt, and noticed Neil had put his freshly washed shirt on the couch next to his jeans.

“Do you need someone to drive you tonight?” Rick asked him as he took place on the kitchen table.

“Why would I need you to drive me?”
“Well just in case you’re… not feeling well or something”.

“It’s a date, Rick! Why the bloody hell would I need you to drive me to a date? She’ll probably think I’m a poof and run off when she sees you!”

Rick put down his cup of coffee a bit too loud. “Well that seems highly unlikely Vyvyan, because in fact, everybody knows the most poofy person in this house is you”. He opened his paper in a dramatic gesture and pretended to be very interested in whatever the paper had to say. Vyvyan knew he was faking it. The stupid little prat. With his stupid face. He tried to distract himself by lazily playing with the spoon in Rick’s cereal. Rick didn’t pay attention to it.

His mom came just about an hour later, when he was just hooked onto the IV pole for his first feeding session. When the bell rang, he wanted to get up, but Rick stopped him.

“I’ll get it, Vyvyan, you don’t want to break that thing”, he said, nodding to his IV pole.

“It’s not gonna…”

But Rick was already on his way to the door. Vyvyan sat down with a sigh. One of the worst things about the whole thing was being limited physically.

“Hello, dear!” he heard his mom’s voice cheerfully in the hallway, followed by a smacking noise of a kiss on Rick’s cheek. “How have you been?”

“Very well, Mrs Vyvyan, lovely to see you. We were just feeding Vyvyan”.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Rick? I AM NOT A BLOODY DOG!” Vyvyan yelled angrily from the couch. He’d told his housemates this hundreds of times, yet they kept insisting on saying that.

“Mike, hello there”, his mum giggled when Mike stood up to shake her hand. “You seem to be getting fitter every time I see you”.

“I do my best, Mrs”, Mike answered.

“Sorry, I keep forgetting your name”, she said to Neil.

“Oh uhm, hello, I’m Neil”, Neil said, but she was already on her way to Vyvyan.

“And there he is, my favourite son!”

“You only have one son, mum”, Vyvyan said. “Me’.

“And what exactly makes you so sure of that?” She smiled suggestively. Her furry coat smelled of cigarettes when she hugged him close. She’d probably been down in the pub all night again.

“You used to tell me to stick my head down the toilet when I was a child”, he said, ignoring her stupid joke.

“Well, you were an awfully difficult child, honey. Anyway, how are you? Have the lads been taking good care of you?”

“Oh, he’s in good hands, Mrs Vyvyan”, Mike said with a wink.

“Mike, stop flirting with my mum”, Vyvyan said bluntly, then turned back to his mum. “I’m pretty good actually. I’ve got a date tonight”.

"Well just in case you’re… not feeling well or something”.

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“Mike, stop flirting with my mum”, Vyvyan said bluntly, then turned back to his mum. “I’m pretty good actually. I’ve got a date tonight”. 
His mother was silent for a while, the smiled and looked over at Rick. “So you two have finally…”

Rick’s face flushed red in just a matter of seconds. That was strange… It took Vyvyan a few seconds to realize the horror of what his mum had just said. “God, mum! Not with that bloody poof! With an actual, real girl. You know, with tits and a vagina”.

“You better hope she has a vagina. She’s a stripper, she could have anything down there”, Rick mocked, but his cheekbones were still red.

“A female stripper?” his mother asked in surprise. “Oh well, it doesn’t matter to me what she does, as long as she doesn’t break the heart of my beautiful boy”. She squeezed his cheeks playfully.

“Stop being so revolting, mum”, Vyvyan said, making a face like he had to puke.

“I’m your mother, I’m allowed to be revolting”.

Vyvyan rolled his eyes. His mum continued to ask him questions about Sharon, but when she noticed he couldn’t tell her all that much about her apart from the fact that she was a sexy stripper, she changed the subject.

Neil had made them all some tea and his mum told him about her work, she asked him about school and how he felt. He felt fine, he kept telling them. He tried not to think about Rick’s flushed face, but it kept bugging him. Why would he blush after his mum thought they were going on a date? It didn’t make sense. Rick may be just about the girliest boy he’d ever had the misfortune of knowing, but he was into girls. He had evidence of this. He’d once stolen a collection of playboys from his room, and he still remembered the time Rick had been ecstatic to find a girl in his bed after a party.

So why the red cheeks then? He probably just blushed because he was embarrassed someone would even entertain the thought of them together. Let alone Vyvyan’s mum. Not that it mattered. He had a date with bloody stripper and he might even get it off with her if he got lucky. Whatever unresolved feelings Rick had, was his business.

After they’d finished their tea, his mum told them she should go. She gave Vyvyan a kiss on his head and told him to watch himself with that girl. Rick showed her out.

They sat around for a while and then he went upstairs to his room. He didn’t often go to his room anymore, because his bed was downstairs now and climbing the stairs was hard on his lungs. But all his clothes were still here. He’d never been on a date before. What kind of clothes impressed birds?

He went through his collection, but it was nothing you’d expect girls to like. It was mostly just a messy pile of faded shirts with ugly prints on them.

“Looking for an outfit, Vyv?” It was Mike.

Before Vyvyan could even answer, Mike had already thrown him a shirt and some trousers, and disappeared. The shirt was light blue and buttoned, and the trousers were dark grey and cotton. Both were soft and smooth. He stared at them stupidly. He’d never wore fancy clothes before in his life. *Oh God*, he thought. *I’m going to have to look like a poof to get off with a bird.* He put them on anyway.

He felt strangely unlike himself when he’d put them on, and slightly embarrassed when he came downstairs. The first person to spot him was Neil.

“Wow, Vyv”, he said. “Nice clothes, man”.

Rick looked up from his cooking magazine, or whatever girly rubbish he was reading. His mouth fell open. For a second, it seemed like he was going to say something, but he couldn’t.
“Vyv… Vyvyan?” He swallowed. “I… I didn’t know you had a fashionable taste in clothing”.

“I don’t”. Vyvyan grinned. “I borrowed it from Mike”.

“So, you’re really going to chat her up tonight then, aren’t you Vyvyan?” Rick said, sounding edgy.

Vyvyan had expected him to be jealous. Of course he was jealous. He was going to hook up with a stripper tonight. Rick had probably never even so much as kissed a girl. Understandably.

For the next half hour, as he waited for the time to leave, (Mike told him five minutes late was the perfect time to arrive) Rick ignored him. He was reading his magazine, which was by the way a political magazine. There was no particular reason he was paying attention to that. He just happened to be staring at Rick and study the way his hands held the pages.

“Well”, he said when it was exactly five past six. “I suppose I’ll be going then”.

Neil and Mike mumbled a goodbye, except for Rick, who was stubbornly looking at the pages of his magazine.

“BYE RICK”, he tried.

“Bye, Vyvyan”, Rick said, obviously with a lot of reluctance.

Vyvyan blinked stupidly, but decided to ignore it. He didn’t care for Rick's stupid behaviour. He had a date with a stripper.

“Remember Vyv, a little bit of what you fancy does you good”, Mike said, patting him on the shoulder as he walked him out.

He suspected he was hinting at sex, but he wasn’t sure, so he just said: “Thanks Mike”.

It was a half an hour drive to the small restaurant where they had set up to meet. Vyvyan didn’t know the restaurant and it was at a fairly random location, so it took him a while to find it. He parked his car at the side of the road, and walked the bit to the restaurant in just his shirt. It was the start of September, and it already was chilly, especially in the evenings.

He looked around if he could spot Sharon as soon as he’d marched through the doors. The design was plain but cosy: wooden tables with fake candles on it, a stylish black bar. It was the kind of place he would usually find so boring he wouldn’t want to be caught dead in. He preferred places he could go with his mates and spill the beer over the floor. He supposed he had to make an effort if he wanted to hook up with a girl, though.

She was already there, sitting in the middle to his left. Her long black hair was combed, not wild like when she went out or was working. She was wearing a black top that she could easily wear during work, though. It showed off her cleavage rather well. All in all, she looked really fit.

To be fair, he’d never given a shit what people thought of his looks, except for when it came to hot birds. His appearance had changed quite a bit over the past few months, though. He may not look to bad with a bald head, but his puffy cheeks still revealed his undeniable sickness. She didn’t even know he was sick. What if it would disgust her?

“Hey Sharon!”, he said.

“Hi!”, she said. “You look very handsome”.

“Thanks”, he said, grinning. “You too”. He added after a pause. He knew he had to tell her.
“Uh. I have something to tell you, actually”, he said nervously after the waiter left. She looked at him expectantly.

“Of course”, she said encouragingly when he stayed silent.

“Uhm, I can’t eat so well. Not normal food anyway, just liquids”. He looked at her. “It’s because… I’m sick”.

“I thought so”. She nodded. “What is it?”

“I have… a teeny bit of cancer in my lung, liver and bone marrow. They say I have a good chance of recovering”. He hoped that came out right.

She stared at him. He could tell she was in shock, but there was something else, too. Something he really hated seeing in people’s eyes. Pity. “For how long?”

“I was diagnosed about… six and a half months ago”.

“Oh God, Vyvyan”. She had her hands at the side of her head. “Why are you telling me this now?”

He decided to play up the drama a little. That sort of stuff worked on girls. “I just wanted a nice date without being reminded of it the whole time”, he snivelled.

“Okay, okay. Vyvyan?” She grabbed his hands. “It’s fine. Let’s just have a nice date”.

The waiter came and took their orders and they had dropped the subject by the time they got their food. He had a salad, which was easy to digest. It didn’t taste so well. One of the many downsides of chemo was that made him lose his appetite.

But apart from that, he thought it went quite well, actually. They talked about the usual boring stuff: she told him she studied law, but had to strip in order to pay for college. Vyvyan told her he studied medicine, but he left out the part that he’d been home-schooled for a long time. They had a lot of champagne, and he started to get really hammered.

Then there was that awkward moment after they’d finished and paid the bill where he wondered what would happen now.

“Vyvyan…” she said, folding her hands and looking at him. “You’re awful cute. I really like you. But you have to understand… in your condition… I think we just have to stick to tonight”.

He wasn’t sure how to respond to that. He liked Sharon, she was extremely fit and very nice. But he didn’t think he fancied her in the way that you were supposed to fancy a girl.

“We still have the night though…” she said seductively. “Did you get here by car?”

“Uhm yes”.

“Would you like to… show me your car?”

His mouth just kind of fell open a bit. Was she saying…? Could it be…? “Errr”, he said.

She laughed, stood up and held her mouth to his ear. “Come on you idiot. You're not scared are you?”.

It was nothing like he had expected. It was fast, clumsy and rough. It was a lot of black hair and panting on top of him. He only lasted for maybe five minutes. It could be more, he didn’t exactly count. The fact was that it was over soon, too soon, and before he knew she fell down on her back
next to him. He wasn't sure if they had to cuddle, but she said: “What’s the time?”

“Uhm, twelve thirty”.

“Is it? Oh shit, I have to go”. She started gathering her clothes.

“I’m very sorry, Vyvyan”, she said when she’d put her shirt and trousers back on. She kissed him on the lips. “I wish things could be different. Call me when you’re doing better, yeah?” She got out of the car, slammed the door and she was gone. Off to the taxi at the other side of the street.

At first, he felt euphoric about having lost his virginity. He had done it with a hot stripper. As he drove home though, it slowly dawned on him that basically, he had been rejected.

By the time he got home, he felt pissed. He stormed in, took his IV pole and started bashing the TV with it. That ought to make him feel better. Except that it didn’t. So he made his IV pole his target.

He was still hitting and kicking it when a voice behind him said: “Vyvyan, what on earth do you think you’re doing?” Rick. Of course. Just the bloody person he wanted to see right now.

“Piss off”, he said.

But Rick walked up to him. He was still dressed, even though it was one in the morning. “I demand you tell me why you come in here, wuin the telly and start molesting your own hospital equipment!”

“I said: piss off”. He was still hitting, but weakly now. He felt tired all of a sudden. Out of breath, he sunk down on the couch.

“Vyvyan, are you okay?” His housemate had turned from the role of angry mother into that of worried friend in one moment.

Vyvyan couldn’t speak.

“Do you need your inhaler?” Rick asked.

He nodded.

“I’ll be right back”.

Vyvyan closed his eyes as Rick pressed the inhaler to his mouth.. They sat for a while as Vyvyan steadied his breathing.

“Did she hurt you?” Rick asked quietly. His voice was so calm and soothing for once, it was a welcome change.

Vyvyan shook his head, still breathing into the inhaler.

“Then why were you wrecking the telly?” He asked it with a smile.

A few more steady breaths and he lifted up the inhaler to talk. “I’m just so bloody sick of everyone always giving me a special bloody treatment because I have cancer!” he shouted. “It’s like, when they look at me, all they do is pity me! No one can look at me without seeing the bloody fucking stupid cancer!”

“I don’t see you that way”, Rick said.

He was still tipsy and high on adrenaline and Rick’s face was actually kind of nice-looking from up this close. The bastard. That stupid bastard.
“How exactly do you see me, Rick?” he asked, staring him boldly in the eye, not sure what he was doing. Or, he probably did realize it, because his heart was beating like a drum.

It seemed like the next couple of seconds that passed lasted ages.

Then Rick abruptly leaned forward and kissed him. Vyvyan didn’t move. He was too taken aback. Even if he had been provoking him just a second ago, he didn’t really think he would go through with it. Rick studied his face, looking more nervous and vulnerable than he’d ever seen him. But there was no need for him to worry. It was Vyvyan who pulled him back into a kiss.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Well, I thought it would never get finished but here it is. Sorry for the delay, I've been having a lot more things to do and to focus on in real life than I did before, so less time to focus on fanfiction. However I promise I'll finish this story, if it's the last thing I do!

When Rick was thirteen, he'd gone to the cinema on a birthday party from a popular boy in his class. This had been a miracle in itself, because none of the other boys in the class really liked him, for a reason he couldn’t understand. Perhaps because he was so much more intelligent than all the other kids in school. This was what mum had always told him during their afternoon tea in the glassed-in porch, when he told her the other kids hadn’t let him play with them. He’d sometimes wished God he had blessed him with a lower intelligence, because even if the other kids were quite stupid, he disliked being alone.

So why the boy had suddenly invited him to his party had been, at the very least, questionable. But he’d seen his mum talking to the boy’s mum in the schoolyard one afternoon, a few days before receiving the invite. Maybe that had something to do with it, but he hadn’t known for certain. They’d went to see *Napoleon and Samantha*, a film about two stupid kids and their pet lion. It had been boring as hell, and clearly he hadn’t been the only one who thought so. Next to him, one of his classmates Gregory was kissing one of the girls. Using tongue. Rick had been staring at it in both fascination and horror.

“Why are you looking at, freak?” Gregory had whispered.

“Isn’t that disgusting?” Rick had asked.

“No, of course not you idiot!” Gregory answered. “You’ve never kissed a girl?”

Rick shook his head.

“You’ll see what it’s like”.

He hadn’t known what it was like for the rest of primary school. And it had continued to be a mystery to him when he went to secondary school. He’d thought he’d known when he went to college and he’d kissed a girl on summer camp, but it was only now that he found out he hadn’t had a clue.

It was now, with Vyvyan’s mouth fiercely on his own, he finally knew. This was it. This was what Gregory and everyone else had meant all along. He realized how completely mad this was, but he found himself caring surprisingly little. Who cared about mad? Who said he couldn’t be doing this? There was no one watching. There were no rules saying you couldn’t be making out with your friend who usually beat you up. Not that he cared about what the law had to say, but none of it mattered now. Except him and Vyvyan.

He started kissing him in his neck, his hand resting on his shoulder. Rick had never even admitted this to himself, but he’d always had a secret admiration for the area around Vyv’s jaws, throat and neck. It had perfect shape. Vyvyan pulled him away from his neck and started kissing him full-on, with open mouth. Feeling Vyvyan’s tongue didn’t startle or scare him. He could never have guessed
the feeling of another person’s tongue in your mouth could feel so great. He wanted more of it. He wanted to know what it felt like when people in books said they ‘tasted’ someone. If there was anyone he wanted to taste, it was Vyvyan.

If he’d known kissing the bastard was this nice, he’d have done it much earlier. He shifted a little when Vyvyan began to tug at his jacket, nervously wondering if this was the point where they should be starting to take off their clothes.

“Listen, Rick”, Vyvyan said, breaking their kiss.

“What is it Vyvyan?” Rick asked, maybe sounding more aggressive than he’d intended.

“Er, I just want to clarify”, Vyvyan said. He paused. “I'm not a poof”.

“Oh, shut up”, Rick said, and he kissed him.

He started tugging at Vyvyan’s Very Metal jacket impatiently. Now that they finally crossed the line, he was very, very eager to cross even more, although he wasn’t sure what there would be on the other side of them.

His fantasies about girls and boys had always been quite abstract: he usually looked at pictures or envisioned their bodies, but he had never thought about how he would go about having sex with them. And he was equally clueless now, as Vyvyan took off his shirt and gently pushed Rick with his back to the couch. He just knew he wanted it: he wanted to try it all, he wanted everything. He was no longer trying to convince himself that it was okay to do this. And he didn’t even care if the carpet would get all sticky.

The punk bent down over him with a sly grin on his face. His lips were close enough to Rick’s to kiss him, but he didn’t do it. Rick tried to, but Vyvyan teasingly pulled back. He moved his hand down, letting it hover over the zipper of his trousers.

“Nice stiffy!” he said, grinning.

“Oh for the love of Cliff, Vyvyan, I’ve gone through all the trouble of snogging with you, so would you just get down to it already!”

“You know, I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t mention Cliff Richard when I’m trying to have it off with you”, Vyv said, sounding amused. His tongue stuck out from his teeth just a little, which Rick had only seen him do when talking to girls he liked. “We wouldn’t want my knob to go limp, now, would we?”

“You watch it, young man!” Rick said angrily. “I will not have you offend the great Cliff Richard…”

“Tell me, Rick. Would Cliff be allowed to do this?” Vyvyan bent forward to his ear, sucking and biting it softly. His breath and mouth felt warm.

“Oh, hmmm, uurrgh”, Rick murmured. “That’s… that’s really nice, Vyvyan…”

“And, would he be allowed to do this?” The punk asked while starting to unbutton his shirt. He lowered his head and started nibbling and licking at his nipple. If the ear-sucking had made him horny, this made him gasp and shift around like a girl in a porn movie.

“N-n-no, Vyvyan, he wouldn’t be, no”.

“What about this?” Finally, he reached down and unzipped his trousers. Rick tried not to whimper. He had never experienced this feeling before. Not even that time when he had a wet fantasy about
his sociology teacher.

The punk came back up again, kissing him in his neck, his hand still at the same spot.

As the punk undid his trousers and pants, Rick started to panic just a little. He had never done this before. Not with a different one than his own. Vyvyan probably noticed his hesitation, because he grabbed his hand and guided it.

“S-slower”, Vyvyan said.

Rick did as he was told.

“Wait”, Vyvyan said, swallowing nervously. His voice was small and squeaky. He sounded more like the vulnerable boy he had seen in the hospital. “I think I’m going to come”.

“Do you want me to stop?” Rick asked. He was surprised at the calmness in his own voice.

Vyvyan nodded frantically before saying: “Yes”.

They tried to take things slower, but soon, the only sound to be heard was their heavy breathing. Rick may have called out Vyvyan’s name a few times, but he’d rather leave that part out of his memory. So when Vyvyan started making sounds he’d never held possible to come out of Vyvyan’s mouth, he suspected the punk was close. Rick remembered every detail vividly, but you can probably fill in the blanks yourself. If he were to write a book about everything, he wouldn't include these details. Obviously because he wouldn't want pervs to get off on it, but honestly, he didn't wish to share them with anyone.

Much to his surprise, Vyvyan didn't shy away when he pulled him in for a kiss afterwards. He’d expected his housemate to instantly start reject him again, but Vyvyan turned out to be an eager snogger.

“Uh, I have to take a piss”, Vyvyan said finally.

Rick watched his naked butt as got up and he walked out of the room. He’d seen it a few times, when he was showing off, but this was different.

When Vyvyan came back into the living room, he threw him the toilet roll paper. “Catch this”.

“What for?” Rick asked in surprise.

“To clean up your bony, sticky bum, of course”.

“Oh, of course”. Rick cleaned himself silently, after which he picked up his underpants from the floor and slipped it back on.

In the meantime Vyvyan had gathered his shirt and pants. He put them back on and sat down next to him. “You know, if my lungs weren’t so messed up, I would kill someone for a smoke right now”, he said.

“Don’t be stupid, Vyvyan”, Rick snapped. “I’ve always made it perfectly clear smoking is bad for you and I’d expect you to know better by now”. He knew he was being mean, but he couldn’t help himself.

“You've smoked too, you hypocrite bastard”, Vyvyan responded.

“No, I didn’t”, Rick lied.
“Liar! What about the time you thought I was pregnant?” The punk looked very smug that he’d remembered this and was clever enough to bring it up.

“That’s a completely different situation. I was having severe stwess, you know! How dare you even bring this up”.

“Poof”.

“Oh shut up. Just shut up! We just made love for Cliff’s sake and you start to blame me for smoking!”

“Did we?” Vyvyan asked.

“Did we what?”

“Did we… make love?” Even though he couldn’t pronounce the word ‘love’ without sounding like he had to stop himself from gagging, there was also something of bewonderment in his face.

“Well I mean… when two men who fancy each other have it off, isn’t that what making love is?”

Vyvyan didn’t answer. They didn’t look at each other. “I should be going to bed”, Rick said, and he wanted to get up.

“Er, Rick?”

“Yes, Vyvyan?” Rick said.

“I was thinking maybe it’s best if we don’t do this again for a while. You know, considering my current situation and everything”.

Rick didn’t know how to answer that. He just stared at him.

“Yes, of course”, he said. He paused. “It’s going to be all right, Vyvyan”.

“It’s a few weeks now”.

“Until they’re going to see if the chemo worked?”.

“Yeah”.

Rick nodded. He didn't want to think about what would happen if it hadn't worked. Were there other options? Would he die? He'd established long ago that he didn't want that to happen. They said goodnight and went upstairs. Of course, he couldn't sleep. The events of the night kept going through his head. How was it possible the first sexual experience of his life so far had been with the bothersome punk living in his house? Although, he had to admit, Vyvyan wasn't as bothersome these days as he used to be. Being sick had changed him a bit. Not so much that he wasn't annoying anymore, but enough to snog with him. Why had he done that? Was he so scared of the results that he would sleep with just about anyone? Or was Neil right and did Vyvyan really fancy him? He tried to distract himself by reading some magazines, and ended up falling asleep with the pile on top of him.

It was usually Neil who functioned as their alarm.

"Morning lads, I think it's about time we got uuup", Neil's voice called from the hallway. "I know you're probably not listening to me anyway, because I'm the only one that actually cares about going to college and learning..."
Rick sighed. It was a good thing he was in a good mood today. He tossed away the magazines, got up and walked out of the room.
Chapter 12

The injection had made him feel a bit dizzy. He tried to focus on the CT scanner as it moved up and down above his head, making a rattling noise. His vision was blurry. Looking at the machine was calming but incredibly frightening at the same time. It could see inside of him, know things about his body that he didn’t. It may be good, but it may also be very bad. He was optimistic, though. He’d been able to eat a whole sandwich independently yesterday.

“All right, Vyvyan, we’re done”, the CT technologist said through the intercom. He entered the room as Vyvyan rolled out of the tunnel. It was the same bloke who helped him the first time he did this. It seemed like ages ago. He hadn’t paid attention to his appearance much the first time, but as he observed him now, he didn’t look so bad. His skin was nice, dark and smooth. Much the opposite of Vyvyan’s own skin, which was pale and spotty.

As Vyvyan sat on the edge of the table, CT Bloke removed the IV and covered the injection spot with a small piece of gauze. Vyvyan stared at his nameplate. His first name was Dave.

“We’ll have your results by Monday”, he said. “So uhm, hang tight yeah?” He patted him on the shoulder. “Try to relax. Spend some time with your boyfriend”.

“He’s not my bloody boyfriend”, Vyvyan snapped. “Look, Dave, I don’t know why everyone in this bloody hospital keeps thinking I’m a poof, but I’m not”.

“Whatever you say, mate”, the other man said with a smile, cleaning up the injector. Vyvyan looked at the blurry ground. “Are you all right?” CT Bloke Dave asked. “You look a bit pale”.

“I’m completely fine”, Vyvyan said, but as soon as he tried to step off the table, he grabbed it to keep his balance.

“All right, you’re not walking by yourself”, Dave said. He rushed over and wrapped an arm around his waist. Vyvyan slapped his hand away. “I’m not a bloody girl!”

He closed his eyes, leaning on the table with both of his hands and tried to clear his head. Tried to let the blood flow. When he tried walking again, though, he almost sunk through his knees.

“I may need some help”, he admitted.

He let the other man swing an arm around his shoulder and help him stumble out of the room. Rick was waiting for him in the hall.

“Take good care of him”, Dave said, as his housemate took over.

“I will”, Rick said.

“And you”, he focused on Vyv. “Watch yourself. We’d like to see you come out the other side of this alive”. Vyvyan rolled his eyes at him.

“Thanks for the help, Dave”.

Dave must have picked up on the sarcasm in that, because he chuckled as he closed the door.

“He seems like a nice chap, doesn’t he?” Rick asked.

“Let’s just get out of here”, Vyvyan grumbled.
A weekend seemed like a bloody long time if you had to wait for the results that would basically
determine your future. His nearby future, anyway, but if it was bad, the chances of him getting any
more of a future were getting slimmer. He didn’t know what was worse: the waiting or having to
find out it was bad news. Vyvyan had no idea what to expect. He didn’t know how he would take it
if it was bad news, but the waiting, was. killing him. Even trying out several experiments on SPG
couldn’t take his thoughts off it. He’d even tried to teach him tricks. On Sunday afternoon he’d rolled
out the lawn sprinkler all the way up the stairs, into his room, where he put the sprayer into a bucket.
Then he went outside to turn it on. What he hadn’t foreseen was that the sprayer was hanging over
the edge of the bucket far too loosely, and it fell off the moment the water flow came through. It
started swishing in all directions. After wetting his wall, it fell and the water seeped through his
doorway onto the hall. It was already running off the stairs when he came in. When he saw, he
quickly ran outside to turn it off. But Rick had already noticed.

“Vyvyan, what on earth are you doing!” He said, coming out of his room.

“I’m making SPG a fish tank!” Vyvyan explained, annoyed that Rick failed to see this obvious fact.
He expected his housemate to shout, and for a moment it seemed like he would. But he just sighed.
“Vyvyan, stop being silly. SPG is not a fish”, he said. “As a matter of fact I doubt he can even
swim!”

“Well, he’ll have to learn”, Vyvyan said, going back into his room. He picked up the bucket and the
sprayer. “I’ll take it outside then”. And he stomped off the stairs. He could almost feel Rick’s eyes in
his back.

“Vyvyan…” Rick said, but Vyvyan didn’t want to listen. If he wanted to teach SPG how to swim,
he’d teach him how to swim. No one was going to tell him what to do, not before tomorrow.

An hour later though, he’d given up. He’d dried his hamster with a towel and put him back in his
cage.

“All right, stay there you don’t want to swim”.

He went back off the stairs and into the garden. He couldn’t be in the house right now. The walls felt
too stifling, the spaces between walls too cramped. Now he was sitting in the garden, his back
against the wall, his arms around his legs. His trousers were dirty.
He wasn’t particularly thinking about anything. He was just staring up at the sky, the different shades
of clouds, and wishing he knew how to escape time. Maybe if he stared at the sky long enough, the
normality of it would absorb him, and things would feel normal again. Like when he was six and it
was summer and he barbecued on the balcony with his mum. When there was loads of time, an
endless guarantee that there would be a tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and the day after that.
Enough tomorrows for a lifetime. And Mum would let him have a few sips of her beer, after which
she would let him stay up late to watch telly after bath time. His mum never had been the most
hygienic of sorts, but when it came to keeping clean her son it was different. No matter how poor
they’d been, she thought somehow being clean would give him more of a chance. She’d scrubbed
him and washed his hair so thoroughly even his bed smelled of soap and shampoo. He’d always
hated to be so clean, but he would like to have bath time now.

He didn’t even hear the door opening.

“Vyvyan, how long have you been here?” Rick’s voice was close to his ear. The friendliness in his
tone still spooked him a little. Back in the old days he’d never suspected Rick to be anything other
than a complete bastard.
“I dunno. Few hours, I s’ppose”. He didn’t look at him.

His housemate squatted down next to him. “You’re nervous, aren’t you?”

“Gee, Rick. How’d you guess?” He couldn’t keep the snappiness out of his voice, and he didn’t care. The fact that they’d had it off two weeks earlier didn’t mean he was going to be all lovey-dovey now, or even nice. He had other problems. He was allowed to behave like a prick today. Not that he’d ever needed an excuse before.

“Alright, there’s no need to get agressive, all I’m saying is it’s perfectly normal to feel this way”. Vyvyan didn’t answer.

“Do you want to come in? Neil made you something to dwink.”

“Not particularly”, Vyvyan answered.

“Oh come on, Vyvyan. Don’t be like this”.

“Look!” Vyvyan yelled. “Why don’t you just leave me alone! I’ve got enough problems without your stupid bollocks distracting me every bloody day!”

“We know you’re stwessed, okay? We all are. And it’s alright if you want to take it out on me…”

“Is it?”

A tiny smile curled around Rick’s lips. “Well, I don’t have to tell you that, do I?”

“Okay, Rick”, he said, and he got up. “That’s a deal, then”. And he walked inside. Why not? He thought to himself. He might as well go inside and have supper with everyone like nothing was going on. He might as bloody well sneak into Rick’s bedroom tonight and take his frustrations out on him. It didn’t matter. Fooling around with his housemate wasn’t going to change the results. Nothing was. And Rick would be willing. He was certain of that. That git was so desperate he would spread his legs for anyone.

“Ah, he’s decided to come in”, Mike said as he entered the room.

“Yeah. Decided I was hungry”, Vyv said as he sat down.

“Well that’s good, ’cause Neil made you something”.

“Oh, don’t mention me, Mike, even though I did most of the work”, Rick said defensively as he came in.

“You just stirred, Rick”, Neil said, as he turned around. In his hands was a large plastic cup with a straw: in it a yellowish substance.

Vyvyan stared at it. “What’s that?”

“It’s a milkshake, Vyv. I made it myself. It’s vanilla. You know, since you can’t eat and everything”.

“Great!” Vyvyan exclaimed, grabbing it out of his hands.

“Uhm, don’t drink it yet, all right” Neil said. “We wanted to wait until our pizza’s ready”.

“We’re watching Bastard Squad”, Mike added.
They settled on the couch. Rick put the blanket around him. Then he helped him attach the food bag to the IV pole. He’d done it so many times by now it went very smoothly. Vyvyan didn’t even protest. It was nice being taken care of sometimes. The rest ate their pizza’s as his food was dripping into his nose through the tube. But he enjoyed the taste of the milkshake. It was empty within a minute, but it tasted great.

“Thanks, Neil”, he said as he placed the empty cup on the table.

Of course, he sat next to Rick of all people. His housemate stared in front of him. He had a sudden overwhelming desire to touch him. Playfully, he let his hand wander over his leg. Rick pushed it away.

“Could you keep it in your trousers for one minute, Vyvyan”, he hissed.

“What was that, Rick?” Mike asked from the other side of the couch.

“Er, nothing, Mike! Just telling Vyvyan he needs to wash his trousers”.

Vyvyan grinned. He was enjoying this game. In this moment, it didn’t seem like tomorrow was all that big of a deal. Maybe it wouldn’t be bad news. Maybe he could just keep on living his stupid life in peace. Without chemo. Without any of this bollocks. He couldn’t allow himself to hope, though. That was dangerous.

One minute, Rick had said, but they watched a whole other episode. The Bastard Squad was his favourite program, but he would like it to be over by now. He looked at the clock. Almost nine. He could try to fake being sleepy. When the credits rolled, he yawned exaggeratedly.

“Oh dear oh dear. I am so very tired”, he said in his most convincing voice.

“Oh, blimey, yes”, Rick added. “I think it’s about time we went to bed, isn’t it?” He got up and stretched. “Well, nighty-night”. And he left.

“Big day tomorrow, Vyv. Get some rest,” Mike said. He got up and headed for the stairs.

“Peace, Vyv”, Neil mumbled as he followed Mike out of the room.

Vyvyan waited a few minutes until the noises upstairs had quieted down. Then he unhooked himself from his IV pole. Instead of going to his bed in the living room, he sneaked upstairs.

He knocked as quietly as he could on Rick’s door.

Rick’s expression as he opened the door was intense.

“Well, you did promise”, Vyvyan defended himself.

“Shut up”, Rick said. He grabbed his shirt and pulled him inside, kissing him immediately. The kiss was all over the place: perhaps the sloppiest kiss he’d had so far. Sometimes Vyvyan went too fast, and Rick tried to slow down and they were out of sync. But Vyvyan was impatient. Rick was wearing his bath robe, and this kind of made him hard.

“Do you want to... cuddle or something?” Rick asked nervously, about half an hour later. They were lying next to each other, staring at the ceiling in the dark. Both were slightly out of breath.

Vyvyan looked at him. "Poof", he said.

"For one man to love another, Vyvyan, is not..."
"Yeah, yeah. I should go", Vyvyan said. He got up and collected his clothes. "Night".

“Goodnight, Vyvyan”. He thought there was something sad in Rick’s voice. But he wasn’t sure. He walked off the stairs in his naked butt.

The drive to the hospital was silent. It was early, and everyone was in a bad mood, staring sulkily out of the window. Vyvyan was in no particular mood at all. He just wished it would all be over and done with. Every second of this thing so far had been miserable.

His Mum was waiting for him in the waiting room of the Oncology Floor. Of course she hugged him and asked him a thousand questions. Was he feeling better? Had he been able to eat a little? He said yes Mum, I’m fine, shut up Mum, until Doctor Richardson came to get them. He only shook Vyvyan and his Mum’s hand before guiding them all into his office. It was a bit cramped to sit there with five people, but they made it work.

“Hello Vyvyan, hello Mrs Basterd, hello all”, Doctor Richardson greeted them all, nodding friendly. “I hope you’re all doing well”.

“Yes we’re doing well, just tell us the bloody results!” Vyvyan couldn’t stop himself from shouting. He hated when people beat around the bush, filling their time with formalities instead of saying the things that mattered.

“Vyvyan!” his Mum hissed disapprovingly. “Don’t you use that tone. This man wants to make you better. I’m sorry, Doctor. He’s a bit tense, as you’ll understand”.

“It’s fine, Ma’am”, Doctor Richardson smiled, but it was a forced smile. “I’ve known him for a bit longer than today”.

“Bo-wing. Tell us the results already”, Rick sighed.

“Shut up, Rick”, Vyvyan said, but he was secretly proud.

“All right, everyone, if you’d be so kind”. Doctor Richardson folded his hands and gave them a stern look. “We’ve taken a look at the results of your CT-scan, Vyvyan, I have some bad news”. He let those words hang in the air for a while, as if he wanted to give them time to prepare.

"Unfortunately the chemotherapy hasn't worked. All of the tumors have grown, some more so than others. Especially the ones in your lung and bone marrow have grown exponentially. What's equally worrisome, though, is that the cancer has spread. We detected a mass in your spine, too. I'm afraid it's a new tumor".

“It’s become worse?” His Mum looked even paler than she normally did. “But I thought you said he was stable. You said it was stable!”.

“I'm very sorry, Mrs Basterd. We can't explain what caused this sudden increase in aggressiveness of the cancer. But as it is what it is, we want to try treating it more aggressively. This means we want to try using stem cell treatment.” He took another pause. Nobody responded.

"is a process where we will try to replace the cancer cells with healthy cells. We'll do this by giving such high-dose chemo that it will destroy all the cells in the bone marrow and the immune system. Even the healthy ones. We'll then give you”, he looked at Vyvyan, “new stem cells which will create new white blood cells. This is a process of several weeks, and will require you to be hospitalized in an isolated, disinfected room. This is necessary because your immune system will be broken down completely. Which unfortunately means you will become very sick for a while”.
Vyvyan had just stared throughout his whole explanation, feeling sick to his stomach. But this made him respond again.

“No, no, no”, Vyvyan yelled. “I’m not going to lay in some bloody room like some bloody hothouse plant!”

“Vyvyan, this is the only way to treat you right now. We can’t offer you anything else. It’s either this or…” he sighed. “I don’t have to tell you this, do I? You know what’s in store for you if we don’t do this”.

He did know. It meant he would be in a coffin in probably a matter of months. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Screaming was probably the best option. Scream so loud the whole floor could hear. Destroy every bloody awful machine in this hospital. Every oxygen mask. Every CT-scanner. Every Doctor. Burn them all. Burn everything. It was all so unfair.

“I’m completely bloody sick of this!” he screamed, knocking over his chair. “Bloody tumours! Bloody hospital! Bloody bloody! I’d rather become a bloody tumor than having to stay here for…” He wanted to scream some more, but there was no air in his lungs. He gasped.

Doctor Richardson was by his side quickly. “Easy now, easy now”. He took his inhaler out of his pocket and brought it to his mouth, helping him inhale until his breathing had regulated again.

“I can assure you, you still have a very good chance of beating this”, he said. "The majority of people in your age group with your type of cancer makes it out alive”.

“He’s right, Vyv”, Mike said. “It would be a bit quiet around the house without you”. It was Mike’s voice that brought him back to reality. A little.

Rick’s words were even worse. “Please, Vyvyan”.

Vyvyan looked at him. There it was again: that sincere look. That look that said: I think you’re a complete and utter bastard, but I would have you shag me in a heartbeat. And I don’t want you gone.

“Okay”, he said, barely distinguishable, because his lungs were still tight. His arms felt tingly and were shaking. His mouth tasted like pure vomit.

“What was that?” Rick asked.

“I said okay, ploppy pants!”

He let Rick help him up. Doctor Richardson continued to explain. He told them the treatment would start next week.

Back in the car, Vyvyan closed his eyes. He thought that if death was anything like sleeping, it must be really dull.
Rick looked at Vyvyan from behind the glass. It was kind of… unsettling seeing him like this. There were tubes and wires coming in and out of his body everywhere. Rick tried to see where they were all going. One IV line was attached to the crook of his elbow, another one was leading to his chest. An oxygen mask covered his nose and mouth. It was called a BIPAP, one of the transplant nurses had told them - a machine that helped him breathe when he was asleep. Even when he was awake, he wore oxygen tubes. The boy who once chucked telly's out of the window, was now too weak to breathe independently. Too weak to do anything but lie on his back, really.

It had been almost two weeks now since Vyvyan had gone into treatment. He was currently receiving extremely aggressive, hard-hitting chemo to eradicate all of the cancer cells and make place for the stem cells Vyvyan's Mum had given him. It showed. He'd already lost a lot of weight during his illness, but the boy lying behind that glass looked like he barely had any muscle left.

Mrs Basterd, obviously, was given the role of main caregiver. She stayed at her sister's house nearby and hung around in the hospital practically all day. They usually found her either in the hallway, looking like she had barely slept, or next to Vyvyan in the transplant room, wearing a facemask, hairnet and hospital gown. Those were the things you had to wear in order to be allowed in the room with him. Rick had loudly refused at first, since it was obviously fascist to wear anything resembling a uniform, but the nurse had friendly informed him he could either wear it or leave. He'd reluctantly put it on every day since, because that's how often they went to see him.

"Do you ever wonder what all these wires are for?" Neil asked. He was standing next to Rick, hands in his pockets

"No, we don’t Neil", Rick snapped. “And to be quite honest I don’t see why it should matter. Vyvyan’s fighting for his life over there, have a bit of wespect”.

"There’s only one thing we need to know guys: it’s keeping him alive", Mike said.

"Well, it’s kind of making him sick first, isn’t it? He’s been doing nothing but throwing up for the past few days.”

“Yeah”, Neil backed him up.

“Well don’t look at me, I’m not a doctor”, Mike said. “Could have been, but even I think it’s too much effort to…. The nurses”.

Rick nodded. That made sense. There were many things he would do to get a piece of the action, but becoming a doctor wasn’t one of them. Hospitals were depressing and smelly. All the invisible bacteria flying around, the fluids and substances that ran through the tubes in Vyvyan’s body made him highly uncomfortable.
“Hello guys”, a nurse behind them said. Rick was sure he’d never seen this one before: she appeared to be slightly younger than most of the nurses of the transplant team and had black curly hair bound together in a ponytail.

“He’s been sleeping for a few hours”, she continued. “He’s absolutely exhausted. Maybe you should go have a drink in the cafeteria downstairs, have a coffee, and come check on him in a bit, see if he’s awake”.

Mike lowered his sunglasses and held out his hand. “Speaking of coffee, I’m…”

“Oh, for Cliff’s sake, behave yourself Michael”, Rick hissed, slapping his arm away. “Yes, we will, thank you”, he said to the nurse with a convulsive smile. She smiled back faintly, before heading into the transplant room.

Mike gave him a look. “What was that for?”

Rick ignored him and made his way to the swing door at the end of the hall. He didn’t have time for this nonsense. Not while Vyvyan was in there.

The other followed him soon enough and they went down the hall. It was five floors down with the elevator. Mike ordered them all coffee, some sandwiches and a bowl of nuts for Neil after he made a fuss about the lack of vegetarian food.

A few minutes later they sat staring into their mugs of weak coffee, not speaking. The cafeteria felt slightly less depressing than the rest of the hospital, but it was still a hospital. They could see the administration desk and the door from here. People were walking in and out, making him wonder of all the reasons they could be here. Maybe they just had a broken foot, or maybe they had someone who was mortally ill, not knowing if they would make it out alive. Just like them.

“You know, I just think hospitals are totally boring”, Neil said. “I’d rather die of abusing my body than here”.

“Hold that thought, Neil”, Mike said. “They might save you a spot”.

“I can’t believe you two”, Rick said angrily, trying to keep his voice down. “Can’t you just behave like normal, decent human beings for once!? God, you embarrass me. The staff here must think we’re completely potty.”

“Oh, and that’s our fault, isn’t it?” Neil defended himself.

“Bloody right it is, Neil!”

“Yeah? Well you’re behaving just us weird as us”, Neil said.

“That’s hardly my fault, is it? Vyvyan may be dying in there, I’m allowed to be a little upset!”

“We’re just as upset as you are, Rick”, Mike said calmly.

“Yeah! What gives you the right to yell at the staff and not us?” Neil asked.

“Well…”. Rick fidgeted with his cup of coffee. “Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?”

Neil seemed to think about this for a minute, then concluded: “No”.

“Well… he’s my…” he cleared his throat, looking down at the table. “Vyvyan’s my… look, do I need to say this?”
Mike didn’t say anything, he just sat there chewing on the spoon looking amused. The hippie thought again for some time and nodded. “Yes”.

“He’s my… well, we haven’t officially decided anything yet, but basically, me and Vyvyan are together”.

Occasionally sleeping together meant you could say you’re together, didn’t it? They had never given a name to what they had,

“What?” The look of sheer surprise on Neil’s face couldn’t have been bigger.

“They’re doing it, Neil”, Mike helpfully added.

“I never knew you were gay, Rick”, Neil just said, frowning.

“I’m not! I wasn’t!” Neil and Mike stared at him.

“A little gay, maybe, yes, but not the sort that… look, it doesn’t matter. What I meant to say is that if I seem a bit… unreasonable, you know why”.

“We’re all in the same boat, Rick”, Mike said. “He may be your boyfriend, but he’s our friend. And if there’s any of us who hates this the most, it’s probably Vyv”.

That made him shut up. He was right. They were here for Vyvyan. Even though the staff was nice, this whole thing had started to wear on all of them. He would have liked to talk to Vyvyan for a bit right now.

“Do you want to go see if he’s awake?” he asked. They all agreed, abandoning their coffee.

He was awake, all right, putting two fingers in the air as soon as he saw them approaching through the glass. The BIPAP mask had been replaced by oxygen tubes, and there was fluid going down his catheter. He was on chemo again.

“How’s it going, Vyv?” Mike asked after they’d all changed in the hospital gear and walked in the room.

“Thanks for asking Michael, I’m so very wonderful”, Vyvyan answered, rolling his eyes.

“Vyvyan, please”, Rick said. “We’ve been waiting here all day, (this was a lie) so do all of us a favour and be nice”.

“I’m not a very nice person, Rick”, Vyvyan answered.

“Well, I can’t argue with that. Is this the way you talk to the nurses as well?”

“Uh. Yes!” A triumphant smile appeared on his face.

Rick sighed. “Right. Well. Are they treating you all right?”

“They still won’t let me eat any dead rats”, Vyvyan said.

Mike smiled. “Must be tough”. For the second time, Vyvyan displayed a large grin.

“Speaking of nurses, do you think you could get me the phone number of that young one with the black hair?” Mike asked.
“It’s too bad that she in fact fancies me”, Vyvyan said.

“It’s too bad you’re taken”, replied Mike.

“Right. Forgot about that”, Vyvyan said. “Wait a minute. How did you know?”

“I told them, Vyvyan”, Rick said with a sigh.

“Oh”, Vyvyan said. “Well”. He was silent, seeming to not know what to say on the matter next.

“I guess this means I’m the most sexually unwanted person in the house now”, Neil said.

“You already were”, Vyvyan said.

“He’s right, Neil”, Mike added.

“I guess you agree with them too, Rick?”

“What?” Rick looked up from his fingers that Vyvyan was playing with. He was tugging at his gloves and it was very distracting.

“Do you think Neil’s the most sexually unwanted person in the house”, Vyvyan repeated, like he was reading an exam question out loud.

“Oh, yes. Yes I do Neil”.

“Great”, Neil grumbled, folding his arms. “Thanks for bringing down my already non-existing self-esteem”.

Well don’t look at us, Neil. That’s what you get from wearing those smelly hippie clothes”, Rick said. Vyvyan grinned and nodded in agreement.

“Oh yeah, let’s all hassle Neil like we always do. It doesn’t even matter we’re in a hospital and one of us has cancer, it’s me who gets picked on again”.

“Shut up Neil”, Vyvyan said.

It was astonishing how quickly everything went back to the usual dynamics once Vyvyan was awake and they were all sitting together. It almost as if everything was normal. Almost. Each of them was tired, but at moments like this, they did a very good job of feigning normalcy. Well, apart from a few things. Vyvyan and him never used to play with each other's hands. He used to think this kind of thing was poofy, but really, it felt quite nice.

“We ought to get going, Vyv”, Mike announced about an hour later. “Neil still has to make supper”.

“Hey!” Neil said. “Why am I always the one who has to make supper?”

“Because no one else will”, Mike simply explained.

Neil didn’t answer that, probably because there was no arguing with that.

They all said their goodbyes. It always felt weird to leave Vyvyan behind in that room and going home without him. The sky had started to get slightly darker when they drove home. It was even weirder coming home to a house without Vyvyan. After supper, which was awful as usual, they all took some time for themselves. Neil went to meditate on the floor, Mike did whatever it was that
Mike did in his spare time. He didn't have time to keep track of that. Rick withdrew himself in his room, trying to think of some poetry while listening to the radio. Some stupid country song came on.

*Whenever we meet the world's at your feet*  
*You know I love you but don't ask me why*  
*I can't break the spell so please won't you tell*  
*where can I run to when you say goodbye*

*Sing me another love song to soothe me tonight*  
*Play me another love song to make it all right*  
*You're my consolation when I'm counting tears*  
*A real sweet illusion to live through the years*

Something about the cheeriness of the song angered him. Damn these cheery country songs pretending like love was all rainbows and butterflies. Didn't country people know the world was a ruddy awful place sometimes? God. Country was for fascists, anyway. He grabbed Vyvyan's bludgeon and smashed the radio to pieces.

Vyvyan was given two days of rest after the chemotherapy. He still couldn’t leave that bloody room, but at least he had a break from all the medication. After that, the transplant started. This meant Vyvyan’s Mum stem cells were injected into Vyvyan’s blood by a vein and would hopefully stay there. Everything seemed to be going well. Vyvyan seemed to be doing well under the circumstances. He was in a better mood than the start of the treatment: he didn’t make as much snarky comments toward the staff anymore and a visit by their group would always lift his spirits. He was however getting fidgety and restless. He was thrilled to be getting new cells, that he was on his way to getting better, but he was also very impatient for it to be over.

The weeks went by without anything notable happening. When the transplant ended, he had to stay in the hospital for a while to look out for possible symptoms or infections. Rick didn't notice any kind of obvious progression. Vyvyan was still weak, still couldn't breathe without the assistance of an oxygen tank. Still, the doctors did their best to be optimistic. After a few days, however, some rashes had started to appear on his legs and arms. This could be a bad sign, and the doctors were currently doing a biopsy on it. It was all just a matter of waiting. Each and every one of them was impatient for it to end. Rick tried to make their visits a bit more entertaining by playing games, but no one ever played along.

The phone rang. What time was it? He was on the couch, so he must have fallen asleep. The phone rang again. He couldn’t be bothered to answer the phone usually, but with the current situation and everything, it could be important. Reluctantly and a little nervous, he walked up to the ringing phone.

"Hello this is Wick”.

“Rick, hello, sorry to bother you at this hour” - Rick quickly glanced on the clock: it was six o'clock. “but this is doctor Richardson”.

“What is it?”, Rick said, perhaps a little too aggressive.

“I’m afraid Vyvyan is doing badly. He has a very serious bloodstream infection”. Rick couldn’t speak for a moment.

“This kind of infection usually doesn’t happen this early after the transplant… it's spreading quickly, and we don’t know if…”

“What!? You don’t know what? Go on, tell me!"
“We don’t know if he’s going to make it through the night”.

It was like a silent bomb dropped. Trampled his heart.

"I’m very sorry, but we think it’s wise for you to come over and say your goodbyes, just in case”.

Rick had already hung up the phone before the doctor had finished his sentence. He felt numb, somehow not able to get himself to respond to the news properly, but he was also very clear-headed. *He may be dying*, a voice in his head said. *You need to move. Now.*

He literally screamed for Mike and Neil. They had never gotten out the house so quickly – they probably had never gotten out of the house this time of day ever. It was busy on the road, so he couldn’t drive as fast as he wanted, which made him want to scream. As he drove, he could feel himself getting angry. Angry that this was happening to Vyvyan. Angry that it was caused by the treatment. Angry that they had said he might not make it. Why didn’t they try harder?

The hospital looked even more depressing when it was dark outside. The fluorescents lights made everything look different. Weird. He felt sick at the sight of it. As they went up silently in the elevator, he thought he may as well just be sick all over this place.

As they approached the transplant room, Rick's eyes searched for Vyvyan. He could see him lying there: the BIPAP mask over his face, his eyes closed. A doctor and a nurse were standing by his bedside. When the doctor spotted them, he gave them a solemn nod and came up to them.

“Tell me what’s going on!” Rick shouted to him immediately. “I demand to know!”

“Sir, we need you to calm down…”

But Rick was beyond reasoning. “You're poisoning him, aren't you? Not that I should be supwised with you fascists taking care of him! We never should have trusted you!”

“Come on, Rick”, Mike said, and he grabbed his arm. “Let’s go drink some water”.

“I’m not going to sit around drinking *water* when Vyvyan is dying!”

“We’re not saying goodbye to him when you’re like this!” Mike yelled back. It may be the first time ever he saw Mike lose his patience. “He might have another couple of hours, and who knows: he might survive! But you need to be calm before seeing Vyy. He can't have this right now."

Rick fell silent. “You’re right”, he said weakly.

“Now come on, let’s go sit down, all right?”

He didn’t want to sit down at all, but the tiredness hit him in a sudden wave. So he walked behind Neil and Mike to the waiting room, where Vyvyan’s Mum was sitting. As soon as she spotted him, she basically fell into his arms crying. No, it wasn’t just crying: it was howling. It was the scariest, most primal sound Rick had ever heard. She couldn’t even talk, so they just stood there. Vyvyan's mum holding onto his jacket and making that bloody awful sound.

Chapter End Notes

This is the song Rick heard on the radio:
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I want everyone to know that I have been struggling with this story for a loong time. That's why I haven't updated it on so long, besides being busy. I just couldn’t decide on how to continue. But I finally wrote this, and I’m sorry if I’m disappointing anyone with it. I hope you still want to read it.

So this is a warning. This can be triggering for some people. If you feel like you can't/don't want to deal with that, or you just don't want to get sad, you can still get out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He woke up on his bed. His own bed. Now this was certainly strange. He’d been lying in that Godawful hospital for so long he’d gotten used to it. And now, all of a sudden, he was here, in his room. And he was dressed, he noticed as he looked down. In his normal clothes. His jacket, his watch, his spikes: it was all there. Almost as a reflex, his hand shot up to his head, to feel the cold metal of his stars. His stars were back? He hadn’t had those for months. With big strides, he walked to the bathroom to look in the mirror. What he was his face, but something wasn’t right. It took him a while to realize what was wrong with the picture. He had hair. Bloody hair. There it was: his red trihawk, as if it never had left. Not believing his eyes, he slid a hand through his hair, which was hard from all the gel.

This is bonkers, he thought to himself. What day was it? Had he traveled in time? Had he just slept for a really long time? Had he dreamed it all? He knew that wasn’t true. Every minute of it, all the pain he had suffered: it had been as real as that time Rick kneed him in the balls in that girly way of his. No. There was another explanation for all this.

He decided he’d better go see if any of the others were home, and he made his way to the stairs. It was incredible to be able to walk off the stairs without pausing every two seconds or carrying a heavy oxygen tank with him. He’d forgotten what being healthy felt like.

The room was empty, except for Rick, who was sitting on the couch, reading one of his war comics.

“Uh, hi Rick”.

Rick looked up. “Oh hey Vyvyan, I didn’t hear you come in”.

Vyvyan stared at him stupidly. If he had been in a deep sleep for a long time, this wasn’t how Rick would react.

“Uh, where are Mike and Neil?” he asked.

It looked like a realization hit Rick’s face. “Well… now you come to mention it. I don’t know. Shouldn’t you be asking yourself that, Vyvyan?”

He was getting more confused by the minute. “What do you mean?”

“Well how should I know where they are?”

“Because… I was in the hospital, and I was bald, and now I’m suddenly here, and my hair’s
He fell suddenly silent, looking around the room. Now that he was looking closer, he wasn’t sure if he could see every detail of the room. Usually he could see every pen, every piece of dirt that was lying around, but the picture wouldn’t get clear. It was like he was trying to zoom in on a bad quality picture.

“Wait a minute”. He looked back at Rick. His face was the only thing that was as clear and detailed as ever. “Rick? Am I dreaming?”

Rick closed the war comic and folded it in his lap. “Well, that depends, I suppose. Am I as handsome as in weal life? Because if not, then probably yes.” He smiled smugly at of his own joke.

“Look, just answer me: am I bloody dreaming?”

“Honestly Vyvyan. If this is a dweam, and I’m part of the dweam, you don’t have to be asking me that, do you? Don’t you know alweady?”

“God”, Vyvyan said with a sigh. “If I’m dreaming, you’re as much of a bastard as the real you”.

“YES, you’re dreaming”, Rick sighed, rolling with his eyes. “God, it makes you wonder how figure out anything for yourself”.

“Well, my dreams aren’t usually this boring”, Vyvyan said. “I usually dream about… explosions and violence and things”.

“Well, it’s… kind of a different situation now, isn’t it?”

This confused Vyvyan. “Really? How so?”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“Rick, if you don’t tell me what’s going on, I’m going to dream you a toilet plunger up your bottom”.

It took a while before the dream version of Rick spoke again. His voice was soft and gentle, which was what he always sounded like when he wasn’t shouting. Vyvyan had always liked it when he spoke like that. His dream reproduced it perfectly.

“You’re in a coma, Vyvyan”.

His chest tightened. The blood rushed to his head – if it even was his head. “W.. what… how…”

“I don’t know how”. Rick spoke calmly: more serious and composed than his real self ever was. “I’m you. Remember?”

He needed to sit down, so he stumbled over at the couch and sat down next to Rick.

“B.. but… will I get through it?”

“I don’t know any more than you do, Vyvyan”, Rick said, in that smug way of his. “I’m awfwaid that if you want to know more, you’ll have to wake up”.

“God, that could take months”, Vyvyan said. “I might be stuck in here till I’m old”.

“I doubt it’ll take that long”, Rick said.
“Rick, stop making my dream boring”.

He knew that he was basically talking to himself, but the Rick his dream had manufactured felt so much like the real thing

“So if this is a dream… that means I could do anything, eh?” Vyvyan stood up again, pacing through the room. “Like, I could dream us some naked birds. And blokes, since you’re a poof”.

Dream-Rick didn’t even defend himself – either because he knew Rick had accepted being a poof, or because his subconscious didn’t have any time to play games. “Vyvyan, I don’t think it works like that”.

“We’ll see about that”. He tried to focus and think of naked people really hard, but nothing happened. Or not until something else started happening. It was the furniture. Their shapes started to change: stretching out, warping.

“What’s happening?”

“Blimey. I think the scenery’s changing”, Rick answered.

He was right: slowly but surely, the shapes and colours of the room faded away and blended in with brighter colours, forming a new scenery. When everything stopped twisting, what he saw was a blue sky. And his hands at the steering wheel on the dashboard of a bus. The sun was shining brightly and they were driving. Rick was sitting next to him, now wearing his brown coat.

“Hey! Wait a minute”, he said. “This looks just like time we drove off the cliff with Mike and Neil”.

“Why, I think you’re right, Vyvyan. It’s even the same bus”. Rick looked around. “Any idea why your dweam might want to take us here?”

Vyvyan shrugged. “No idea. Do you want to try if we can stop somewhere?”

“You can if you want, it’s your head after all”, Rick said with a smile.

“Ohkidokey”.

But when he tried to pull the brakes, nothing happened. They didn’t even slow down a little: the bus just kept driving.

“Bloody hell. We can’t stop”.

“I thought you could do anything you wanted, Vyvyan?”

“Rick, now is not the time to get clever”. Vyvyan looked out on the road, that seemed to fold out before them endlessly. “What are we supposed to do now, just keep driving? It couldn’t get more boring than that”.

The view was nice though: mostly barren nature with rocks and trees and a whole lot of nothing. “Well, maybe that’s the point”, Rick said.

“How d’you mean?” Vyvyan looked over at his friend.

“Maybe you’re supposed to keep driving until…”

“Until what? Until I wake up?”
“Yes. Or…”

“Or WHAT?” He asked, but he knew the answer, he knew it.

“Well it could really go two ways couldn’t it? You could wake up and everything would be fine, or you could…”.

He just looked at the road. “I know”, he sighed. “I know Rick, I just don’t know how to wake up”.

“Vyvyan, listen to me”, Rick said. “I do NOT want you to let go, do you hear me!? Because if you do I’ll… I don’t know what I’ll do. So if you’re standing at the gates of oblivion, then hitch a wide with me, ‘cause I’m on the last freedom moped out of nowhere city”.

Vyvyan smiled. “You know I’ve always liked it when you do that speech”.

“I know, I’m bwilliant”, Rick sighed.

Nothing happened, though. They just kept driving, and he didn’t know if it was five minutes or five hours. He was torn between wishing the dream would change again, and fearing that Rick might not be by his side if it did. All the while, the landscape stayed the same. He might as well be looking at a video that was on repeat, but without the cuts. So when something was different, it got his attention right away. He could see a billboard looming up from a distance, something with a face and letters on it, but it was too far away to read. As they got closer, he could see it.

‘CLIFF’, it said in red, graceful handwriting.

His heart dropped. This seemed all too familiar.

“Look out, there’s a cliff right there!” Rick pointed, and about a few miles ahead of them, he could see the road ending. It just stopped, right in the middle. Vyvyan was sure there had been just an asphalt road a second ago. There were no other turns, and the cliff seemed to stretch out everywhere. There was simply no escaping it if they kept driving. He tried pulling the steering wheel, but just like he’d expected, it was no good.

“I can’t bloody turn!” he yelled.

“Oh dear…” Rick had gone pale.

“This bloody car isn’t working!”

“Vyv… I think this is it, Vyvyan”.

Vyvyan looked at Rick. He was scared, so scared, but he found comfort Rick's face. He could see it so clearly. It had been etched into his memory throughout the years, with all of its disgusting details, and now it came back to him one last time in a powerful image.

"You know, I... I never really hated you", he said. His voice was tiny. "Even though for all those years, you've done nothing but get on my nerves. And now..." he tried to compose himself. "I'm sorry, Rick. For everything, and, I wish..." he took a deep breath. His throat was tight. "...that we'd have had more time".

“I know, Vyvyan”, Rick said. It took a while before the lump in his throat allowed him to speak again. “Poof”, he said. Rick smiled.

For a split-second, he was weightless.
The sound of vital signs machine, beeping slowly but steadily, drove Rick nuts. He had been listening to it for hours now, and he couldn't read his magazine with that Godawful sound distracting him all the time. Reminding him. Mike and Neil were taking a nap as Vyvyan’s mother was sitting by her bedside holding his hand. Rick felt his eyes getting tired. They had put him in a drug-induced coma. To make sure the antibiotics wouldn’t hit him too hard, they said. Rick had been angry about that. He didn’t see how putting him in a coma was going to help. Mike had had to calm him down again.

He hadn’t even noticed he’d fallen asleep until he woke up from mumbling. It was coming from Neil, who was sitting by Vyvyan’s bedside. Vyvyan’s mother was sleeping now. The sun was up, but it was a grey and clouded day.

“It’s okay, Vyv”, Neil mumbled. “You can let go if you want…”

“Neil? What are you doing?” Rick asked.

“I’ve heard that it’s good to talk to people in coma’s”, Neil said. “They can hear you, you know. So I’m just telling him that if he’s tired and wants to let go, that’s okay”.

“Neil, you bloody idiot!” snapped Rick. “Do you want Vyvyan to die?”

“Well, no…”

“Yes, I think you do, don’t you Neil!? Just so you won’t be the doormat in the house anymore. God, you’re so self-centered! Vyvyan?” He went over to Vyvyan’s bedside and took his hand. The only thing he could think of to say was a quote from his own speech, the one from that day they drove over the cliff.

“Wow, Rick”, Neil said. “That’s actually very beautiful”.

“Well, thank you Neil”. He couldn’t help but feeling a little proud of himself. Vyvyan might actually have a better chance of surviving through the power of his speech. He really believed that. He had to believe it.

Time went by. Probably hours, but Rick didn’t keep track. All that was important was Vyvyan, and he just wanted him to get better, move past this so they could move on with their lives. It was later that morning doctor Richardson came to tell them in a flat voice that there was nothing they could do. Vyvyan was too sick. All they could do was wait and try to let him go gently and painlessly.

Rick didn't understand at first. Or, he understood, but it seemed so impossible he hoped the universe was playing a joke on him. Ha ha, good one, universe, he'd say. But then he realized. He'd yelled at doctor Richardson, demanded that he try something to save him. Anything as long as they wouldn't bloody give up. He would have fought the bloody bastard if Mike hadn't held him back.

2:42 PM. Treatment-related death to stage IV Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

That was Vyvyan's official time and cause of death. He heard Doctor Richardson say the words merely hours after they had heard he was dying.

The hurt- the ugly, desperate, gruesome feeling that took hold of him, was like nothing he could have ever imagined. It was comprehensive. Everything around him, the whole world, had suddenly turned appalling and unimportant in an instant, like a switch had been flipped. It wasn't even dark, it was absolutely colourless. It seemed to him nothing mattered and would ever matter again. The only thing
that he could feel, the only thing that mattered, was this awful truth that filled him entirely.

He looked over at Vyvyan. No, at his body. There was just a body now. No Vyvyan. Vyvyan's mother wailing next to it. He wanted to scream. NO. This can't be. You can't just let death take you, Vyvyan, it's not like you. Put up a fight, you bastard.

Doctor Richardson asked them if they wanted to spend time with him. He said that they could take as long as they want. Rick didn't know what to answer, but Mike nodded and said they wanted to, so he just followed with shaky knees, unsure of he wanted this.

Mike walked over to the bed and put Vyvyan in a tight embrace. "So you left, Vyy", he said quietly. "So you left. And we haven't even had a chance to say goodbye".

"I can't believe it. He's really gone", Neil said. His face was in the most disheartened state Rick had ever seen it. Not his usual gloominess, but a deep sorrow that was in his very bones.

Rick didn't know what to say. What do you say to a dead body that used to be Vyvyan? The only thing he could think of doing, was laying his hand on top of his. Then he interlaced his fingers into his, and held it to his chest. He didn't know how long he had been sitting there, with Vyvyan's still, cold hand clutched to his chest, until Helen came in.

"I'm so sorry, Rick", she said, squeezing his shoulder after she let him go. There were tears in her eyes, too. "I know how much you cared for him".

He couldn't think of anything else to say but: "Yes. Yes I did, Helen". His throat was all tight.

"I'm very, very sorry", Doctor Richardson said. "We did everything we could". Rick nodded. Of course he felt like screaming in this man's face, but it was all no use. He knew that.

There was an endless amount of crying and hugging. Especially Neil kept repeating how shaken he was. And even Mike had hugged Rick, something which he couldn't have imagined under normal circumstances, but that seemed natural now. Rick needed the comfort, but he suddenly had enough. Then, when Vyvyan's mother had told the nurses they were finished, they came to transport Vyvyan to the morgue. They all shuffled out of the room. Rick could just see how they started taking off Vyvyan's oxygen mask and IV lines.

"Mike? I think I'd like to go home now", he said quietly.

Mike nodded, his jaw a firm line as usual. "We'll go in a second". His voice was distorted. "Go get the car. Me and Neil collect his things and we'll come after you".

His eyes were red, swollen and teary as he walked through the corridors and outside. He couldn't care less about people seeing him: he didn't even see them. As he got inside of the car, he lay his head on the steering wheel and closed his eyes. The dam broke. One of the tears landed between his lips and made his mouth taste salt.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize again for the sadness. Trust me, this was very difficult for me. It's the hardest thing I've written so far. But I did it because sometimes in life, these kind of shitty things happen. They happen every day. I think we should be able to explore these things
through fanfiction as well. Most of my fanfics are happy though, so if you want to be cheered up after this, you can read my Life After Scumbag two-parter for instance. That ought to cheer you up. I'm sorry again.

*Can you dream in a coma?* I did some research and technically no, you shouldn't be able to. Yet there are plenty of fascinating stories to be found online where people claim to have had the most bizarre dreams. They were mostly drug-induced comas, like Vvv's. If any of it is true, I don't know. But I gave my own interpretation of it, because I wanted Vvv to have a worthy last moment.
There weren’t a lot of boxes, just about six. Vyvyan’s skeleton was stuffed messily in a box that was far too small. It looked slumped and somehow even less alive than it usually looked. There was another box next to it, with ‘Vyvyan’s stuff’ written on it, with a black marker and in ugly handwriting. Probably Neil’s.

In the box were Vyvyan’s padlock, nose ring, studs, SPG’s old hamster cage, his Walkman, his study books on medicine which were covered in violent doodles, the war comics that Rick had once borrowed him, and his now empty potion bottles which had become dusted overtime. If you looked closely, you could see some flakes of a red substance being burned to the sides here and there.

Rick stared at what was left of his friend. Completely depressing, just like he said. Getting back to his original point, that’s exactly why he would never want to read or write a book about something like this.

But if he would write a book about it, which he totally could do because he was a natural writing talent, he would probably end it right about here. Sitting here in the front garden in the dim yellow glow of the morning sun, staring at the moving boxes spread out over the lawn. It was a boring ending, but it was as good as any, he reckoned. Like he said, beginnings and endings were fairly meaningless in the big scheme of things anyway. Vyvyan would agree, and he would certainly agree with him on his point about books with this subject.

Who would want to read a book about some bloke dying from cancer and his sissy boyfriend being all sissy about it? He’d say. I suppose you would want to make it into a movie as well so you and the other girlies can have a girly cry about it.

Go away, Vyvyan, Rick thought. Get out of my head. I can’t have you right now. I’m trying to have a moment of peace and reflection, thank you very much. Of course, Vyvyan’s voice didn’t respond. It was only in his head, and he could silence him whenever he wanted to, something he’d often wished he could have done with the real Vyvyan. But he hadn’t talked to the real Vyvyan for so long now. It had been a little over a year since they visited him in the transplant room and he had died the next day.

In hindsight, the doctors had told them Vyvyan had been at great risk anyway. The high-dose chemo had destroyed so much of his immune system, he had been too weak. When an infection stroke and affected his liver and digestive system, his body simply hadn’t had the gear to fight back. It was that simple.

He had always imagined Vyvyan to go out in a blaze of glory, in the midst of the action, maybe as a result of one of his own stupid experiments. An exploding car, maybe, or on a wrecking ball. Not the way he did. He’d just thought any ending was as good as any, but that wasn’t true, he realized.

Vyvyan got dealt a rubbish hand of cards when it came to endings. He would rewrite his ending if he could.

Vyvyan had never bothered to properly clean his bottles, or anything really, no matter how many times Rick had pointed out how unhygienic it was. Also in the box where his studs and nose rings, and his denim jacket, neatly folded in the corner. Vyvyan had sadly been buried without them.

Neil came out of the doorway with something draped over his arm. It was his dress, Rick realized in a shock. Damn. He’d hoped he could have hidden it beneath the sink so no one would find it. “So I looked around to see if I could find more stuff, right, but all I could find was this dress”, Neil said. “So, like, I think we’ve got everything”.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Mike, who was standing a few feet from Rick, nodded solemnly. “Well done, Neil”.

“Give that here immediately!” Rick snapped, sitting straight up. “That dwess cost me eight dollars!”

“I thought you said it wasn't yours, Rick”, Neil said, sounding confused.

“Oh well, what do I care”, Rick sighed. “It’s not like Vyvyan’s still here to insult me about it. So, yes, I wear a dwess sometimes, and it’s vewy conservative to think men can’t wear them, actually! So the joke’s on you”.

Neither Neil or Mike seemed impressed. “Shall I put it with the rest of your stuff then?” Neil asked.

“No, give it here”, Rick said crankily. He ripped the dress out of Neil’s hands. “You’ll make it all messy”. He folded it neatly and put it with the rest of his stuff.

“Right then”, Mike said, “are we still agreeing on doing this?”

“Of course we are, Michael”, Rick said, a little impatient. “We've been over this”.

Once they’d made the decision to move out of the house, they’d had a discussion about what to do with Vyvyan’s stuff. It would feel wrong to throw it away. Vyvyan probably would have told them to just burn it, but according to Neil, that was a really negative ritual. To be quite fair, Rick hadn’t wanted to burn his stuff either.

Rick lifted up the box that said ‘Vyvyan’s stuff’, and quickly turned his back on the other two, so he could softly stroke the denim of Vyvyan’s jacket just for a second. He didn’t want Mike and Neil to see it. It was his last goodbye gesture to Vyvyan, and he wanted it to be for Vyvyan only. He smiled when he thought of what Vyvyan would say if he’d see him like this, but the smile withered almost immediately. He widened his eyes as he felt them sting, and took a silent deep breath. Now was not the time to cry. He just wanted to get this over with.

He took the box to the small, box-sized hole just in front of the window Neil had dug especially for the occasion. The potion bottles tinkled softly as he walked. Then, he put it down and they stood looking at it solemnly.

“It fits perfectly”, Mike commented, then carried on: “All right, we’ll do as we said: if anyone wants anything from the box, now is the time to take it”.

Rick got a sudden overwhelming desire to grab the jacket, but he restrained himself. It was only right for the jacket to be buried too. If it couldn't be buried with Vyvyan, it should be buried here. It was the second best thing.

No matter how much they had tried to convince her that it was what Vyvyan would have wanted, Vyvyan’s mother had absolutely refused to have her son buried in a sleeveless jacket that said HURT YOUR DOG, U.R DEAD and VERY METAL. She said that he’d been a nice boy, and should be buried that way.

“Now don’t get me wrong, Mrs Vyvyan”, Rick had said. They’d sat around the kitchen table to discuss the funeral, and Vyvyan’s mother was up to her third sigaret. “Vyvyan was my boyfriend. But of all the terms I would use to describe him, ‘nice boy’ isn't one of them”. He smiled, so she knew not to take it the wrong way.

She’d just sighed, smiled a feeble smile and said: “Oh, I know. Believe me, I know. I've raised him. But I believe he was still a good boy at heart”. She looked at him and exhaled. “Don’t you think?”
Rick had nodded.

They had eventually decided on Mike’s light blue buttoned shirt, the one he’d borrowed months earlier. Vyvyan’s mother had agreed he could still wear one of his heavy metal shirts underneath. But when they had finally seen him lying in the coffin, they had buttoned the shirt all the way up. It had made him look very un-Vyvyan-esque. Rick had stuck When Rick got some time alone at the coffin, he’d quickly unbuttoned some of the upper buttons of Vyvyan’s shirt, so the heavy metal shirt had showed a little. It had looked slightly better. “Sorry, Vyvyan”, he’d whispered, briefly resting his hand on his cold and stiff chest. He’d known Vyvyan would hate looking like this.

The padlock nose ring, studs had obviously been missing too, but Rick had had time to get used to that, since Vyvyan hadn’t been wearing them in his last months. Still, the combination of all this had made him look bare. Naked. His face had still looked like his face, which Rick had been glad for. But something had been missing. After staring at him for a while, he’d realized it hadn't just been the clothes or the lack of his accessories. It was Vyvyan himself that had been missing.

Approximately thirty people had showed up at his funeral, which was held at the local funeral in Bristol close to their home. Vyvyan’s classmates and friends from school had all been there, among which the ones Vyvyan had always so lovingly called: Scumbag, Pissface and Dickhead. Then there had been some teachers and uncles, aunts and cousins from Vyvyan’s mother’s side: people Rick neither knew nor cared to know. Neil’s friend Neil had made an appearance, and to his faint surprise Helen and Doctor French had been there as well, keeping low-profile. Helen had given him a nod, though.

The service had been concise and to the point. At least that Vyvyan would have liked, Rick had thought. He’d been fairly certain Vyvyan would have rolled his eyes at most of the other stuff that was done and said. Some speeches had been held that Rick hadn't paid attention to –mostly family saying what a lovely little boy he had been, which Rick had scoffed at. He'd imagined how Vyvyan, if he could see all this, would lean back in one of the front rows and comment: "GOD! I never expected my funeral to be so completely BORING".

Shut up, Vyvyan, he’d have told him. They’re doing this for you, have some bloody wespect.

But since Vyvyan hadn't been there, he’d had to do all the eye rolling and scoffing for him. He’d reckoned he could do Vyvyan that much of a favour. He’d done it subtly though, as not to really disturb the service.

He watched as Neil shovelled the soil over the box with the shovel, closing the hole. Then he tamped and loosened it, making it look as if nothing had been buried there in the first place. As if Vyvyan’s last remains weren’t down there.

“Do you think we should… mark it somehow?” Rick asked.

“Best not, Rick”, Mike had said. “We don’t want anyone to find it, do we?”

“No, no, we don’t”, Rick and Neil mumbled almost in unison. The whole idea of burying Vyvyan’s stuff was so that it would never have to go anywhere. It would stay right here, where it had always belonged.

“What do you say?” Mike asked. “One last drink before we leave?

“Yes”, Rick agreed.

It had become somewhat of a tradition. The first time had been on the day Vyvyan died. Rick hated
remembering that day, so most of the time he didn't. But he remembered what had happened after
they had driven home that day. They had just sat on the couch together, each of them as much in
shock as the other. Mike, whose face was wet from tears, said with a distorted voice: “Oh God, I
can’t stand this. I need booze. Does anyone want vodka?”

Rick and Neil had just kind of vaguely nodded and mumbled in agreement, upon which Mike had
gone up to the kitchen and come back with Vyvyan’s bottle of vodka from the fridge. He started
swigging it down right away. No one said anything. Rick, who didn't usually drink, had snatched it
out of his hand and taken a swig as well. It was the most disgusting thing he’d ever tasted and it
burned like hell, but he hadn't cared. Everything that normally seemed important, had now seemed
laughably futile. So who cared if he drank himself to death there and then? Vyvyan wouldn't have,
and he didn't either. He'd quickly become so drunk he had to lie down and fell asleep.

Inadvertently, he’d dreamed of Vyvyan. Nothing had really happened in the dream, they had just sat
on the couch together. Vyvyan had been smoking, and they’d held hands. That was really all that
had happened, and yet it had felt so real. Vyvyan’s sweaty palm in his, his skin. He had even been
able to smell the smoke in his clothes, a scent he had always detested. When he’d woken up, his
mouth had been dry as sandpaper, and reality had crashed down on him like an avalanche. He’d
wanted to be buried in it, anything to escape this awful truth that was now their lives. He’d never
considered what being dead must feel like, because it seemed really boring, but it hadn't seemed so
bad then. Death meant no feelings, and that meant no pain.

The second time they’d drunk vodka had been right after Vyvyan’s funeral. When everyone else had
been drinking coffee in the coffee room, the three of them had sneaked away to Vyvyan’s grave,
which was almost completely covered in brand new flowers. Vyvyan had hated flowers, Rick had
thought. Anyway, they’d stood gathered around it, and Mike had reached into the pocket of his
suave jacket and pulled out a small Vodka flask. The same brand as the bottle they'd chugged down
days before: Boru Irish Vodka. Vyvyan’s favourite.

“To Vyvyan”, Mike had said raucously, and he’d taken a sip before passing it onto Rick. After
they’d passed it around a few times, they’d poured out the rest of over the fresh soil on Vyvyan’s
grave.

“Enjoy, you bloody bastard”, Rick had mumbled. He’d tried to sound steady, but the tightness in his
throat made him fail miserably.

He’d dreamed of him more often, but never quite as realistic as that first time. They were more like
weird, silly dreams where Vyvyan had come back from the dead as zombies or one where Rick had
travelled back in time to save him from ever getting sick. They’d just been stupid dreams that didn't
mean anything. Every morning when he’d woken up, he’d felt equally terrible. Like being hit by a
train, over and over, and it hadn't seemed to start hurting any less. Or maybe it was more like being
run over by one endless train that never slowed down. Once, after having been holed up in his room
for days, he had tried expressing his feelings by writing a poem about it.

Train, train
I don’t want to complain, train
But you're driving me insane
Please get out of my brain, train
I’d rather sniff cocaine
Will you be to blame, train?

The minute after he’d written it though, he’d crumpled it up and thrown it away. “Useless”, he’d
muttered under his breath.
As the took a swig, the vodka left that familiar burning feeling in his throat. It never became any less disgusting, but this was the last time he’d ever drink it anywhere near this house. Anywhere near Vyvyan. His remains may have been buried about two miles from here, this house was where he would always feel his presence the most. Which is exactly why they had to move away. Even a year after he’d gone and months after they had cleaned out his room, they would still find traces of him around the house every now and then. Needless to say, they were mostly traces of destruction: some hole in the wall that he’d smashed, a seat leg he’d sawn off, a shard of a plate he’d shattered, an obscene doodle inside of a kitchen cupboard. And it wasn’t even just that. The house had just never felt quite the same.

“I still think we should leave something behind, you know”, Neil said, after having taken a sip. “To indicate that he’s lived here”.

“Neil, it’s very rare you have anything useful to say, but I agree”, Mike said. He grabbed the marker. “Here Rick, write something on the door”.

Rick took the marker and stood indecisively in front of the door for a while.

“What about: ‘Vyvyan was here’”, Neil helpfully suggested.

“Oh come on Neil, don’t you ever have something owiginal to say”, Rick snapped. Eventually, he wrote something. He took a step back and they all looked at it.

The front was now scrawled with big, black letters saying: Vyvyan Bast(a)rd was here.

“Brilliant”, Mike said.

As a means of a last sort of goodbye ritual, they poured the last bit of vodka over the spot where Vyvyan’s box was buried. They then took the remaining boxes with their own stuff, and slowly started walking towards the car Mike had hired. Rick really did try to bite back the tears, but of course, like so many other times, he failed, so he had to be consoled by Mike and Neil patting him on the back. God, he was a girl.

"He's at peace, Rick", Mike said, patting him gently. "He's at peace".

"You know I don't believe in that sort of thing, Michael", Rick answered, giving him a stern look.

"So if you don't believe in heaven or anything like that, right, where do you think he went?" Neil asked.

Rick shrugged. A thought came up, but he didn't say it out loud. It probably sounded poofy. That's probably what Vyvyan would have say about it, anyway.

Rick looked in the direction of the box as they drove away, and directed his last thoughts towards it. Goodbye, Vyvyan. You bastard. He knew it would be a while before he would stop popping up in his mind. It wouldn't be the last time he failed not to cry. He knew it would be a long time before things would be... better. He knew that this wasn't the end. But it was a start.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for reading.
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