



My name is Jongin.  
I'm the writer who lives next  
door.  
See you tomorrow, hyung.  
Don't forget!

# **ANTEROGRADE TOMORROW**

**Title:** Anterograde Tomorrow

**Pairing:** Kaisoo

**Rating:** R (currently pg-13)

**Genre:** Romance, Tragedy, slight angst

**Length:** Three-shot

**Summary:** Kyungsoo is stuck in the hours while Jongin begs the seconds, because time stops for someone who can't remember and runs from someone who can't miss the last train home.

prologue: *daisies*; word count: 759

Sunlight drifts into Kyungsoo's dream, refracts into something cool and salty and maybe involving heels digging into the soft overlap between ocean and beach. He turns and the wet sand transforms into cold linens.

When he opens his eyes the cocktail of seagull wings and shades of blue is replaced by a ceiling, meters too low, a small window at the end of a narrow bedroom, and peeling wood floorboards under worn rugs. It's his room, albeit not exactly the same as it were yesterday, because there are green sticky notes pasted over every inch of every wall that he can't recall having placed. Second skin of colored texts and diagrams, numbers and dates. A breeze lifts the curtains and ruffles the notes, plays a melody in the tune of drizzled paper applause.

The sight is unfamiliar but not strange, like something that must have happened once before and slipped through his memory. Maybe there has been a day between today and yesterday. Maybe there has been more than a day. Somehow he doesn't have to read the notes to know that they will explain how many days has passed, and what he's meant to do today.

But the little specks of yellow notes amongst the green, some on the floor and walls and table and one on the pillow next to his, strike him most. The handwriting is different. There are no dates. Just words.

Kyungsoo props himself up slowly, habitually reaching to clasp the night table as he slides out of bed. Rug fuzzy under bare toes, scent of six o'clock coffee brewing in the café downstairs gentle on the palate. He picks up the yellow sticky on his pillow and reads it, "*Your name is Do Kyungsoo. You have short-term memory loss, antesomething amnesia, so you won't remember what happened last night. But let me help you out.*"

And the one on the pillow neighboring, "*Last night I put my head on this pillow and my arms around your waist. My name's Kim Jongin. I call you hyung. Yesterday you loved me. Today you'll love me again.*"

He takes a step back, eyes wide and mouth cracked open. His heel crunches on another. "*This is where you undressed me.*"

"*This is where I undressed you,*" is posted on the wall, right on top of a green note that says '*Mijin's no longer serves rice cakes—05/05/2008*'.

A few inches beside another one says, "*And here I pushed you up against the wall and kissed you really hard (approximately, it was kind of dark) and we thought we should have sex.*"

Over the table is posted, "*Here you sat, dangling your legs. I put my palm on your kneecap and you bent forward and kissed me first.*"

By the treasure chest at the end of his bed: "*We talked about ballet. You hummed a tune and my fingers did an arabesque here (because your ceiling is too low and I'd rather not hit my head,*

*okay) here, grand jeté onto the floor, fouetté en tourant and then sissonne on the back of your hand. Pas de valse fast up your arm and you smiled."*

At the back of his bedroom door: *"I leaned on this and read your green sticky notes while you went around cleaning up invisible messes. It came to me that all the green looks like grass, and grass is boring without daisies. So I hope you like yellow?"*

And as he opens the door, one smacks him on the forehead: *"And here's Kim Jongin. Say hello to me?"*

Kyungsoo looks up, gaze flicking uncertainly up the contours of sharp collarbones, tanned flesh, defined jaws. One millimeter at a time. The urge to slam the door and call the police because *there is a stranger in his apartment and this stranger has written him unquestionably creepy notes* hits him in the face.

Thick pulse and dizziness make his head light and stomach turn. He really can't feel his fingers, or knees for that matter. But everything settles down again—almost as if it were always meant to—when his eyes graze a dumb grin and a pair of glittering eyes.

"Hi, hyung," Jongin says, the corners of his lips falling, though features still soft. His voice is new, certainly, and Kyungsoo can't recall precisely when he's heard it before—if ever.

Still, it's almost too natural to rekindle Jongin's smile with a tiny "Hello," and somehow the syllables are perfect on his tongue, perhaps because he's said it a thousand times already. Perhaps because they're meant to be.

**prologue: *daisies***; part one: *lost and stuck*; word count: 6,489

Kyungsoo has a scrapbook of faces and dates. Polaroid collage with little sentences inscribed underneath. This is Zitao, new Chinese waiter doing Wednesday night shifts (6 June 2010); here is Yifan, model requesting Rhapsody in Blue with a dry whiskey every Sunday (19 December 2009); Baekhyun there, but he moved out (6 July 2008). It's a synopsis of Do Kyungsoo: neighbors, acquaintances, old friends, new strangers, presented with military precision. Near the end is a snapshot of a hunched figure, leaning on a brick wall, with one knee bent and the other propping his entire weight. A cigarette rests idly between long, thin fingers. Monochromatic grey ghosts along his countenance. White smoke twirls from the ends of his lips, diffusing through hair and drizzled rain into a strange sense of solitude. Two words are scratched underneath. *Neighbor, smoking.*

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The newspaper is dated 12 July 2012. But more than the fact that Kyungsoo can swear it was only 24 November 2008 yesterday, his shirt takes up a good quarter the front page photo. His favorite shirt. The one that he'd gotten for being employee of the week, with a lopsided, hand-sewn Pororo logo, right up in all of its magnified glory on the cover story.

Hastily scanning over the headlines of '*massive disorder in downtown Seoul caused by raining money*', Kyungsoo focuses back on the picture. It's certainly his shirt, the one that he's wearing right now and has rolled out of bed in twenty minutes ago, in fact. More precisely, the one that he can't remember wearing to any expensive penthouse, which apparently the picture was taken in. According to the article, "*Esteemed novelist Kim Jongin has just been bailed out for destruction of public order, after literally blowing a storm of hundred-thousand won bills out the window of his Seoul penthouse with an unnamed accomplice. Calling it a 'billion-won confetti display', he has caused the largest traffic jam in Seoul history, effectively blocking off streets within a two-kilometer distance as city residents rushed to collect the money.*"

But according to Kyungsoo, as he shoves the newspaper under Minseok's nose, "National Post is pulling really elaborate pranks these days—but where did they find my shirt?"

Minseok frowns hard at the article, and really hard at Kyungsoo, and then towards the other end of the bar. Kyungsoo is too busy re-reading the article and double-checking his shirt to notice it, or the fact that there is someone exceptionally well-dressed seated at the end Minseok's wide-eyed stare, someone hiding an amused turn of the lips behind a glass of whiskey.

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They meet for the first time, Kyungsoo thinks, in the apartment elevator. It's early Friday morning, 13<sup>th</sup> of July, an hour when the world runs on uncertain lamplights, drunken howls, and the occasional punch of laughter. There are just the two of them at this hour, and an obtrusive kind of silence.

Having just returned from the bar, Kyungsoo tries to fight off the cocktail of metallic smoke and the thick scent of alcohol caught in his hair. The last ringlets of saxophone nestle over his fingers and cinquillo beat lingers under his skin, but none of it is enough to fill the abyss that stands between him and the stranger.

The stranger, with an unlit cigarette between his teeth, turns first. The unflattering elevator lighting enshrouds him in jaundice yellow and a heavy veil of lethargy. Kyungsoo wonders, with the cinquillo pounding into his veins, if the man's skin is as plastic as it seems.

"Hot. The weather. It's hot," he says, proffering a hand that Kyungsoo grabs with hesitation. His grasp is surprisingly cold, long fingers and nails cut short and sharp, leathery skin stretched taut over gaunt knuckles.

"Um," Kyungsoo balks, as soon as he catches the stranger staring holes into his face. The handshake suddenly feels more of a deliberate judgment than an abrupt greeting. More frightening than tense and more awful than awkward.

Between the creaks of the elevator flooring and sputters of the fluorescent light bulb, Kyungsoo's voice comes out as a squeak two pitches higher than it's supposed to be, "Yeah. Hot tonight." The stranger says nothing. Instead he leans back on the elevator walls and stares, eyes flickering up and down the length of Kyungsoo's figure. It's the kind of stare that makes Kyungsoo draw back behind his jacket, though a thin layer of cashmere does little to hide him from the other's glaring fixation. Time stands on its toes until the doors open, when Kyungsoo lets out a gasp of air he didn't know he was holding in.

Only later, after Kyungsoo has worked his way down the apartment corridors and noted that the stranger has trailed after him, does he realize that it's probably not the first time they've met.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" He finally asks, voice echoing uneasily down the long hallways. The stranger has stopped at the neighboring door, twirling a keychain around his forefinger. A sliver of moonlight works in from the railings and gleams off of something on his suit. Kyungsoo notes a pair of cufflinks, shiny and expensive-looking, too expensive-looking to belong to someone who would live in this kind of residence.

"Do you?" The stranger's lips work into a slow smirk.

Kyungsoo picks the lint in his pocket. He doesn't remember coming upon the stranger's face while reviewing the memory book earlier. But perhaps he skipped a page. It's happened before. He hurriedly reaches for his bag, and is stopped with a bark of laughter, "So you weren't kidding about the amnesia."

"What?"

"Interesting. Cool. Really. What's the last thing you remember doing?" The stranger interrupts, in no apparent hurry as he slumps against his door and regards the way Kyungsoo is fumbling with the lock.

Even in the dark, the twinkle of sadistic amusement gleaming from his grin is distinct. It makes

him look older than he seems, almost sadly so.

Kyungsoo thinks so hard he forgets to answer, and by the time he turns around again, the stranger has gone.

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They meet again for the first time in the staircase. The sun is breaking into a Monday. A gust of summer blows away the last rays of moonlight. Kyungsoo rushes down for his job at the factory and the man with an unlit cigarette between his lips works his way up. Their gazes collide, and maybe their shoulders graze, and that's enough for Kyungsoo to freeze mid-step.

But the man doesn't spare a second to acknowledge Kyungsoo's flabbergasted stare. He simply keeps climbing, wheezing and panting, face pale and beaded with perspiration. Kyungsoo watches his legs quiver and wobble with each step, as if they're no longer strong enough to support the invisible, enormous weight on his shoulders. As if he would quake and topple over with the smallest tickle of a breeze. It's almost breathtaking how broken his back looks from this angle, all fabrics caving over blades of bones, sharp angles and emaciated lines. Half a thought passes about maybe taking a photo of this man, but Kyungsoo doesn't know what he would label that photo, and plus he's late for work, so he runs on.

For Kyungsoo, summers in suburban Seoul are made of mezzo voices threading deep into midnight, cardboard boxes of leftover toys dragging across rubber conveyor belts, red bean slush and wrinkled newspapers under soft kisses of dusk. There are more entries in his scrapbooks now. His life is surging with columns of black notes; Zitao and Yifan are now more than friends, Minseok has found a new tune; there is a stranger living in the vacated apartment to the left, and they might have spoken before.

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They meet for the last of first times when Kyungsoo swings open his door and comes face to face with enormous, dilated pupils.

"Hi," the man grins, cigarette bobbing limply from the corner of his mouth, "My name is Jongin. I'm a writer. Novelist. I moved in next door a week ago. For the sake of inspiration, artistry, discovering poverty, avoiding the press mob at my usual place, so on. The point is: we've talked before. Twice."

"Oh," Kyungsoo immediately falls back on his usual response, "Sorry—I have anterograde amnesia so—"

"You don't remember me. I know. You forget everything by the end of each day so you won't remember me by tomorrow."

Jongin steps back, nurses a flame from his zippo onto his joint, takes a deep drag, and lets the smoke gush viscous and white from his teeth, "Anyways. Listen. I need to get a manuscript into my editor—Oh Sehun—if you knew him you'd know how much of a fucking douche he is, but the point is: if I don't get in something in a month he's going to nag like a bona fide bitch—and, to be

frank, I'm out of ideas. But not really. I have an idea. And the idea involves..."

It's not until Kyungsoo is coughing back smoke does he realize he hasn't been breathing the whole while, "Um, yes, involves what?"

"You," Jongin smiles.

The thing about Jongin's smile is that only his mouth moves upwards, so all Kyungsoo sees is a beautiful picture of pricey starched white shirts and grinning misery. A whole lot of suffering wrapped up in exposed teeth and narrowed eyes. The prettiest adjectives to dot an abandoned soul, most delicate epithets to cross a closed heart.

Kyungsoo writes that down on the Polaroid he takes of Jongin that night. *This is Jongin, new neighbor, novelist, sad smile (17 July 2012). We will have interviews. He wants to write a book about me.*

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During Wednesday's dinner, Kyungsoo decides that although his daily rituals are simple and repetitive, it's best that way. His memory doesn't last long enough for him to keep up with long-term changes and it's not like he can grow tired of doing something he can't remember doing, in any case.

"So what do you do?" Jongin interrupts, a pen tucked behind his ear and another one between his fingers.

Kyungsoo says that he works at the neighboring toy factory from nine to five, gluing little shiny little marble eyes onto stuffed cartoon characters. A breath of artificiality for the sparkle of life. The job is purely for financial support, albeit Kyungsoo thinks that he might have grown attached to his coworkers and the plushness of the toys, the soft fabrics, the forever cheerful smiles. The job makes just enough for rent and necessities. Still, it's alright because seven o'clock fixes everything. At seven, he heads for the bar to nurse transient melodies from his soul. Technically the hour is about demurely collecting change under drunken chaos, but for Kyungsoo, it's about molding words out of thin air, gasps of smoke and shudders of music, closed eyes and faint sighs embracing the crop circles of sawdust in the carpets. It's about muses slipping through fingers and curling around his toes. Seven is about passion. A dream.

Kyungsoo lets all the two hundred and six bones of his body fall in place as he breathes, "It might be lackluster, I guess. But it's hard to feel the lackluster when you've never really felt the luster. Felt alive, I mean."

"So you're like a walking corpse?"

"More like a walking fossil."

Minseok, his childhood friend and fellow singer in the bar, always jokes that because time has stopped for Kyungsoo four years ago, he must be perpetually twenty years old. But it's not really a joke, and people have stopped laughing a long time ago.

"I think it's funny though," Jongin remarks, dropping his cigarette stub in the beer can before



taking an appreciative sip. Kyungsoo tries not to wonder how it tastes, nicotine and tobacco drowning in fizzling wheat. Instead he peers over at Jongin's notepad, and the little illegible lines of black ink left sprawled over the edges. Jongin explains that they're for a book he's writing. A romance about a man who erases himself at the end of each day. Kyungsoo questions the romance in that. Jongin says no worries, writers are certified bullshitters; just kill someone and it'll end up romantic.

They met for second time twenty minutes ago, when Jongin banged on Kyungsoo's door with a six-pack of Hite and a joint poking out between lax fingers, "Hi, I'm Jongin, your new neighbor. We've met before—" at which point Kyungsoo promptly reached for his book and Jongin commented, "I'm on the last page, I think. The guy wearing a suit."

Kyungsoo stared at the photo, and back at Jongin, and then twenty minutes later here they are: sitting on the fire escape, talking about large philosophies and sub-ideal romances that Kyungsoo can't quite loop his head around. Their knuckles and shoulders are bumping, which makes Kyungsoo uncomfortable, and even more so that Jongin doesn't seem to care. In fact, Jongin doesn't seem to be the type to care about anything.

"What do you mean, it's funny?"

"More importantly, how does it feel to be perpetually twenty years old?"

Kyungsoo contemplates, "Good."

"But isn't it terrible? You're caught in time but time moves on. You can't remember people coming or leaving. The world diminishes around you while you're stuck in the center. All of your old friends leave or die and you can't make new ones. You can't love. You can't hate."

"So why is it funny?"

"It's so sad it's funny," Jongin shrugs, "People tend to feel bad for poor, harmless souls like you. Carrying a larger-than-life burden with smaller-than-life ambitions. Like watching an ant die under a magnifying glass and squealing in joy over the sadness of it all. It's hilarious. Well I mean, I make a living off exploiting it for all it's worth, but it's still hilarious."

Jongin flicks off the end of his cigarette and they watch ashes swirl down three flights of stairs together. A breeze. Jongin inhales summer, exhales toxins. Kyungsoo picks at his toes and fingers and the little bits of rust in the steel staircase before saying, decisively, something that he isn't sure he wanted to say, "You sound so miserable."

"All novelists are."

"Is that why you smoke so much?"

Jongin writes '*inexplicably Good Samaritan and consequently nosy*' in the column headed under Character Traits. Pretending not to see it, Kyungsoo nudges him for the answer until eventually Jongin complies with a sneer, "You don't need to know. Why don't we talk some more about how you keep track of—"

"No," Kyungsoo snaps firmly, "No, I want to know."

“Listen the book is about you—”

“This conversation is about *us*.”

Lowering his head, Jongin mutters something about pains in the asses before ripping his face back up with a blank smile that curdles Kyungsoo’s guts, “Okay. About us.”

“I won’t remember it by tomorrow, anyway,” Kyungsoo reminds him.

Hollowing his cheeks in on the joint until the little flicker of orange disappears, Jongin lets the words flood out with white vehemence, “I’ll tell you what makes me miserable,” Jongin looks somewhere into the distance, and that is when everything falls apart, “I have idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. It means that my lungs are drowning in snot. I’m dying. That makes me fucking miserable, alright?”

The noise of street vendors and traffic and children playing suddenly becomes unbearably soft. Kyungsoo stares at his knuckles and feels the blood rushing out of his face, “I’m—I’m sorry—I didn’t know you were—”

“In other words, god is suffocating me in slow motion. In three years my heart is going to be lopsided trying to pump enough oxygen through my body. I’m going to have organ failure. Eating is going to be impossible because how do you eat a meal while breathing through straws? And why do I smoke, you ask? Why do I smoke. Why.”

Kyungsoo watches his knuckles go bloodless. He wants this to end. He’s sorry. He’s sorry and he doesn’t understand—but Jongin doesn’t really want him to.

“I smoke to die faster. I smoke so that when I’m etherized on the hospital table I’d go out with a swoosh instead of a swish,” Jongin nods, speaks of misery in the form of discursive gray, “But this isn’t funny, you know. This is just plain sad. I’m the saddest fuck on the planet. Miserable, isn’t it?” And a shriek of dry laughter to punctuate the monochromatic anger, “Nah, I’m just fucking with you. It *is* funny. It’s funny because my life is full of this: you think you’re escaping, until you run into yourself. Twenty-three years later it turns out that the longest way round is the shortest way home, and I’ve been running in circles since the get-go. What a riot, huh?”

Neither of them laughs, though Jongin does snort when eventually Kyungsoo finishes things off with a gentle, “I’ll forget by tomorrow.”

Their interview dawdles until it’s seven. Kyungsoo sings tonight, like any other night, but the words and tunes are coming out of his mouth and not his heart and the only thing he can remember is smoke. The liquid pain seeping from Jongin’s seams.

He goes home at half-past midnight and sticks a note up on the wall, a bright yellow one smack in the center of everything, so he won’t miss it tomorrow: “*Grab a toy from work. Leave it by the apartment next-door. (19 July 2012)*”

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Kyungsoo comes home from the bar, two days later, to find a stuffed Pororo by his door. It’s the same toy that he stitches at work, and if he squints hard enough he can almost be sure that he’s

the one who glued the eyes on because he's the only one who manhandles superglue that way. There is a Thank You card underneath Pororo that says, in angry black ink, "*Pity's pretty fucking expensive from someone who can't care.*"

He has no idea what those words mean, but the pang in his heart is too loud to be dismissed. Suddenly all the melodies and rhythms fade away into an overwhelming silence. More sour than disappointment, more bitter than loneliness. Tonight the apartment next-door is buzzing with strident, uneven laughter that sounds something like sobs. A whole multitude of voices and chatter, vague shouts of *Luhan Jongin Sehun* under the semi-buzz of never-empty bottles of scotch and vodka. While passing by to take out the garbage, Kyungsoo catches a glimpse of three very beautiful faces floating beyond the curtains, a sharp glare of chandelier lights, the pungent scent of alcohol and cologne and luxury.

His own apartment looks particularly desolate at this hour. Dimness swallows all of the walls and corners. He re-writes all of his sticky notes in green instead of blue, and Friday passes with the silent clicks of gel pens against neon paper.

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Though technically Kyungsoo can't remember having met the writer nursing what must be his fiftieth cigarette of the hour, the card in his hand says that they're supposed to have regular interviews. More than the card, he *knows* that they've met before. And the thought's not surprising—nothing is really—perhaps due to the messy haze of cigarette smoke that puts everything out of focus: coffee cups, moist windows, the fraying and tarred edges of the writer's notebook; it slows everything down, dulls all of the shines into glows and all of the corners into curves.

The writer smokes, hastily, and Kyungsoo feels this alien, emptied sensation watching him. Like something cracking slowly, deeply, irreversibly within him.

The coffee shop during the evening of July 21<sup>st</sup> is a low rumble of clinking porcelain cups, the continuous drone of tired students, whipped cream murmuring into cappuccinos. It's not particularly loud, but the noise is the kind to quicksand someone. Drown them slowly and leave nothing except clawing fingertips and air bubbles breaking the surface.

Kyungsoo builds half a question over whether or not all writers look like this, with dark circles bruising eyes and complexion caught between yellow and white and occasional twitches of the brow. The question collapses as soon as the writer stubs out his joint and catches Kyungsoo's gaze. One long, hard line from one pair of eyes to another.

"You okay?" The writer, who introduced himself as Jongin, demands briskly.

Jongin doesn't seem to have the time or patience to accept any alternatives, so Kyungsoo only nods, "Yeah. I'm fine."

"Tell me about the accident four years ago. Or well, yesterday, as you would remember it,"

Jongin prompts. There's a hint of anxiety in his voice. Kyungsoo can't help but notice the ugly

smattering of bandages over his knuckles. The purple and green smudges around his wrist. And suddenly he wonders if it's a writer's thing at all, those angry eyes and bloody knuckles and unconscious flinches.

"It was just a typical accident," Kyungsoo says. Though he can't remember days having passed from the particular evening, somehow the shock no longer registers, "I was coming home from the factory—the one I work at right now, got hit by a fruit truck. It was carrying apples. Red ones."

"You've always been working at the factory?"

"Ever since I was eighteen. I went as soon as I finished high school. My mom passed away and my dad was sick so I had to foot his—"

"Yeah, okay," Jongin interrupts. Kyungsoo can see the look of exasperation on his face and wants to protest and no, it's not just a typical sob story about just another kid playing hero. It's a story about family and warmth and hard-earned cookies by the bedside and counting the drops of IV and praying to cartoon characters for happiness.

But Jongin is not in the mood to entertain any clarifications, "So if you weren't such a responsible human, you would've become a singer?"

"I guess so."

"And then you got hit by a truck. Terrific luck," Jongin quips and scratches something out on his notepad. Furiously.

Kyungsoo chews on his lower lip, a bad habit. "Are... you angry?"

"No," Jongin snaps, a beat too quickly. Kyungsoo falls quiet while Jongin reads the next question, scarcely looking up from his pen, "How do you keep track of your life? All the details."

"Usually, I take pictures of new people I encounter, put them in a notebook and list what I've learned about them. I re-read it at the beginning of every day and update it at the end. Other things, I write on my walls, and my planner. The temporary issues I put on sticky notes and paste them wherever. Usually on my walls." Kyungsoo peers at his coffee, and back up again when nothing returns except the noisy grinding of pen against paper.

"Do you find that you have to relearn things? Like if you figure out how to walk to the coffee shop today, by tomorrow would you forget how to walk here again?"

"Well, no. I can remember the answers. I just can't remember learning them. Tomorrow I wouldn't remember walking here with you. I would only know where this place is."

"Convenient."

"Are you really not upset?"

"No."

"At all?"

"Listen. We're writing about you. A novel about you. Let's not talk about me, okay?"

"Why are you upset?"

Jongin's shoulders sag and he drops his notebook, pen, everything with a clatter. Rubbing a coarse hand through his crumpled features, he stares at Kyungsoo with worn exasperation. Perhaps he reeks a little of guilty conceit as he mutters, "Issues. Okay? People with actual memories have *issues*."

Kyungsoo doesn't acquiesce to Jongin's impatient tapping, "If you need someone to talk to about the issues, you know that I'm—"

"You're the perfect person to dump everything on, of course, because nothing would ever burden you because you'd never fucking *remember*, right?"

There is a vague feeling in Kyungsoo's guts that maybe he's said that previous line one too many times. Maybe they've been in this situation before: Jongin frustrated and tattered on the fence of art and reality, Kyungsoo confused and worried, trying to help Jongin down with no idea how.

"I'm sorry," he says, finally, when Jongin has stopped retching for oxygen. He doesn't take his eyes off the way Jongin's fingers are trembling, "You're right. I'm sorry if I asked you this before and I'm just reminding you of something unpleasant, I really don't mean—"

"It's about hands," Jongin suddenly decides. It takes Kyungsoo a long time to recognize Jongin's voice because it's low, monotonous, and awfully quiet. It's nothing like what is usually and diffuses through the air like ether.

"Listen. My life is about hands. It's about shoving your diamond-ringed hands down my bile-washed throat. It's about shredding my soul with a pair of your expensive gloves. It's all about hands. Nails drawing crescent blood. Ink-smudged fingerprints down thighs. Knuckles crushing reflections behind a thin layer of paint and glass. Hands, hands, hands."

A sip of coffee and Kyungsoo presents an apologetic grin, "I still don't really..."

"I'm dying, okay?"

Kyungsoo feels his heart plummet as Jongin continues, with the numbness of a man who has announced the same thing thousands of times already, "I'm going to be dead in three years, maybe two. Probably less. But you know, people won't love me when I'm dead. That's a fact. People might pity me. Worship me. Say that I was a genius mind, revel in the great performance art that was my life. And what do I do with all that? Can I sell it? Can I have a future and a white-washed house and argue about what plants to put in the front yard with their fucking assembly-line *pity*?"

Jongin's eyes are red. His lips are white. The silence is black.

"You know what I think," Kyungsoo has no idea what he's saying, only an inkling that he probably shouldn't be saying it at all—but the words come out on their own, "I think that you're just afraid."

Jongin doesn't speak for a long time, and when he does, he doesn't look up from his notebook anymore, "So if you can retain memories of how to do something, do you also retain feelings? If

you fell in love with a woman today, would you still love her tomorrow?"

"I don't know," Kyungsoo gnaws on his lower lip again, "But I suppose if I can't remember doing anything with her, then I can't really—you can't love someone you have no memories of, right? Isn't love based on memories and actions?"

"Is it."

Kyungsoo fidgets with his sleeves, "You're still upset."

"No."

"You—I—am not your friend—or your therapist—or—I guess I don't even qualify as an acquaintance but—Jongin," Kyungsoo stammers, unsure again of what he's saying, "You can talk to me. I won't judge you. I can't say I understand everything but I—just—wouldn't you feel better if—"

"Shut up," Jongin snaps, eyes still fixated on burning holes into his notebook, "Do *not* lecture me."

"No, Jongin I just—"

"You don't have any right to assume what makes me feel better because you don't understand pain, do you? What makes you think you can judge me? You can't even love. You said it yourself. You can't love so you can't be hurt, can you? Tomorrow you'll wake up and everything will be fucking fine. Everything will be fucking dandy like it's always been and hey, do you ever think that you're only so happy each day because you'd forgotten about all the times you've hurt everyone else? Do you ever think about that? What if you hurt someone yesterday? At least normal people have the decency to feel guilt. You can't feel anything, can't understand shit, Do Kyungsoo, because—you, are, just, a, walkingcorpse."

When Kyungsoo feels something welling in his eyes, Jongin has already slammed his notebook down and stormed out of the cafe.

And it turns out that the notebook doesn't actually have any writing on it, just massive twines of ink balled into ripped pages.

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"You look depressed," Minseok comments one day, sometime by the end of July, when red bean slush is no longer enough for the heat. While they wait for the musicians to unpack their instruments and tune, he turns to Kyungsoo with arched brows, "What happened?"

Kyungsoo frowns, thinks back all the way to when he rolled out of bed this morning, and shakes his head, "Nothing. I had a pretty normal day. Why?"

"I don't know," Minseok shrugs, "You just look kind of solemn is all."

As Kyungsoo chews on his lip and ponders over why he would look solemn when everyone has been perfectly amiable, Minseok chats with Zitao about how the rich writer guy hasn't shown up to the bar for days.

They sing their usual song, a few new improv lines, before Kyungsoo realizes that Minseok was

right. His heart is not in the music.

--

The night washes tides of motorcycle hums and human chatter over Kyungsoo's immobile figure. Midnight has passed hours ago, and his eyes are burning with fatigue, but Kyungsoo simply couldn't fall asleep, so here he is, gnawing on his lip and flipping through his scrapbook.

At some point before he's realized it, he began counting the number of new pictures to the number that has been crossed out. And, to his disappointment, almost all of his old high school friends have moved out and away, and he hasn't made any new notes on any of them since years ago. He tries to dial Baekhyun's old number, and of course, it's out of service. It's probably been out of service for months, years. How long?

"Hey," a voice pops out from the dimness. Kyungsoo bolts a meter and a half and nearly shrieks. But somehow the person standing on the neighboring balcony doesn't look all that unfamiliar. He has an awkward kind of smile, like it physically hurts to move his face that way, "What are you doing there?"

Kyungsoo hesitates about telling the truth. He does it anyway, "Counting the number of people I've lost contact with."

"And?"

"There's a lot," and he feels awfully like sobbing. The distant rumbles of friendship and laughter and camaraderie, things he no longer possess, push out his tears and he turns his head back to the scratched photos in his book. The old, fading smiles and the pain seeps in one molecule at a time. He doesn't want to cry, and he doesn't know why he's crying, "Just yesterday I... I was friends with all of them but... it says here that... they moved away? They left? They're gone? Why? Am I really alone?"

The guy on the neighboring balcony breathes out fogs and glitter clouds, hiding a strangled laugh, "Yeah, you're really fucking alone. We're all alone, except you don't live long enough to realize it."

Kyungsoo puts his head down in his arm and cries harder than he's ever cried before, and he knows this because this is not the kind of pain that can be forgotten by tomorrow.

He doesn't see the blank look on the other man's face, doesn't hear the man's cigarette falling out from between his fingers and onto the ground three floors below.

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The next morning Kyungsoo wakes up with swollen eyes and a sour aftertaste in his mouth.

There is a scrapbook in his arms, paper cuts over his fingers, and the wall of green notes makes him sick to the guts.

--

"I'm not a very good human being. I haven't been one," a stranger in the elevator begins when

Kyungsoo stumbles inside. Kyungsoo almost flinches, except somehow he's not surprised to hear this voice. The low timber and the cracks around each syllable. A kind of grudging reluctance, shy naivety despite the words, "I've hurt everyone who has ever really tried for me. Even myself. I'm a coward, and I take it out on other people because... I'm afraid of admitting it." Kyungsoo nods, and takes in everything about this man before him—the loosened tie, the heavy shadows under his eyes and the caved cheeks, the hunched back, the painful elevations of his chest, straining against a white-pressed shirt. Somehow his swollen eyes the taste of battery acid that wouldn't wash out with mugs of milk disappears so easily. His heart clenches as he reaches out and touches the man's arm, "You'll be okay."

"My name is Jongin."

Kyungsoo might not have heard the last syllable. Still, the name is familiar on his lips as he echoes it, "Jongin."

"I'm a writer," Jongin says, and the elevator doors slide open as if on cue. Kyungsoo doesn't move. They revel in the stillness, the drone of the ventilator and their uneven, noisy exhales. And as the doors close again, Jongin tells a story about a boy who fell in love with dancing, and a dancer, and fell too hard, too fast. A story about someone named Jongin who was trampled under expectations and pressure and gave himself up and stopped loving people, himself, passion, aspiration. It's not a long one, and it ends with a new story.

"So he became a writer, and he wrote about that dancer who he loved and cast away. The innocence that crumbled in his hands, inevitably. People gathered and paid for the pity party and it made him rich and famous and sad—someone called him miserable, once—and he wrote more about corroding dreams and despair and moon-watching from well bottoms, and it made him richer, and sadder, and more famous, and eventually god decided to put him out of his misery. But he had to write one more book, because he's become the kind of bastard who lived on misery. Parasitic dependency on sucking the agony out of others' bones."

The elevator opens. This time Kyungsoo takes a step forward, and pulls Jongin after him. Their steps form a nice kind of rhythm.

"And there was this particularly interesting person he met, who practically begged to be written about. He was everything sad, but he was so happy chasing after impossible dreams. He worked at a factory and wanted to be a singer—even though he couldn't remember shit. He was an amnesiac forced to abandon himself at the end of each day and who refused to comply. Someone who struggled against the overwhelming odds of loss, for a dead-end. It was kind of funny, like watching a hamster run itself to death in a wheel, for an exit that didn't exist."

"They met one day in July. The day the writer found out he was going to die. He invited this guy up to his house, where they turned up a giant fan and let it snow cash from the windows—big crisp bills. That day the writer was angry at the world, and jealous, and he wanted to show the amnesiac that he'd never achieve his dreams. That becoming a singer was the stupidest idea on



the whole fucking planet for someone who couldn't even *live*, couldn't ever experience love or loss or agony or happiness. That him becoming a singer was like a robot talking about writing love songs. Absurd and fucking hilarious."

"Jongin wanted to show off how rich he was, how awesome life could be after losing himself and giving everything up. He was someone who cared more about protecting empty pride than his own life. People said big-ass parties with champagne towers and chocolate fountains make a person happy, so Jongin rinsed and repeated in all of those, and people said that he was happy. He was god fucking happy and—"

"The amnesiac couldn't see it. Here he was, this guy who couldn't even remember losing his fucking best friends and parents, this guy who lived off of tips and counted pennies, the most pathetic kind of earthworm, and he couldn't fucking understand when glory was thrown in his face. Glory, fame, wealth, power, status. Everything that Jongin—that I—have ever worked for." Jongin runs a hand through his hair, shivering despite the heat.

"That was when I realized it wasn't because you were stupid. It was because I, Kim Jongin, was a moron. The whole time I was just trying to prove to *myself* that I was happy, that throwing away all I've ever wanted to be, to wallow in despair, to make a show out of myself, was the right thing to do. I moved into the shithole of an apartment building you lived in not for inspiration, but to watch you suffer. To confirm that you were suffering. I watched you sing night after night and prayed that you'd fuck up and go out of tune and get splashed in the face with a tub of beer. I tried to blitz your little cocoon of bliss because—because—I... I just wanted someone with me. In the quicksand. But you didn't sink. I was wrong. I am wrong, and a fucking moron."

"But you're not a moron," Kyungsoo interrupts.

They're leaning on the railing on Kyungsoo's tiny balcony. Kyungsoo is bent over the metal, estimating the shadows splayed across the grass, with arms tucked under his chest and head bobbling occasionally. Jongin is next to him, propped up on his elbows and facing the other way, legs crossed and gaze on at the stars as Kyungsoo whispers, "You're just lost."

Jongin looks at him for the first time, really, from under his lashes. The moonlight runs down his face, highlighting all of the soft creases and the plastic flesh, and Kyungsoo thinks that Jongin's so remarkably frail like this, so remarkably beautiful.

"I'm going to be more lost. Lost, and lost, and then," Jongin whispers, "One day, *poof*, I'll be gone. I'll be to the world like those photos in your scrapbook are to you. The world won't remember losing me."

Kyungsoo's voice is cracking all over the place and nails are digging up rust when he finally speaks, "No, no don't go *poof*."

Jongin snorts, the dismissive kind of mockery that snarls *you're just saying it*, and makes Kyungsoo want to grab him by the shoulders and scream that he cares, that he really means it—Do Kyungsoo won't allow Kim Jongin to go *poof*. Except he has no idea why he cares, and

Jongin might be right. He might be just saying it. He might not care. He doesn't really know this Kim Jongin, after all, doesn't have any memories of what has happened between the two of them.

"I just really want to remember you, for even one extra minute..."

But if it were as simple as that, his chest wouldn't hurt nearly as much as it does now.

Their shoulders touch a little, but neither of them moves away.

**prologue: daisies; part one: lost and stuck; part two: invisible walls; word count: 7,442**

“I’m Jongin, and I’m here to—”

“Write.”

Jongin’s jaw swings open, shock registering slowly on his tilted eyebrows. The seconds come and go, skittering along a thin line of hesitation. Outside the window the grass dissolves into the sky, burred colors and bright chaos. Kyungsoo waits.

It’s not until Jongin spots the scrapbook lying open on the kitchen counter does he relax into the doorframe, “Oh. So you’ve read up on your notes already?”

“Yup,” Kyungsoo nods, and doesn’t quite notice the look of fleeting disappointment over Jongin’s expression.

Today the conversation resumes in Jongin’s apartment next-door. It’s a white-washed box cluttered full of balled papers, half-empty cans of beer, a myriad of achromatic shapes: sheets brittle and distorted over the nude mattress; tapestries dangling limply like surrender flags. Little cigarette stubs and yellow pills are arranged on a plastic coffee table to spell, “KYUNGSOC”. Everything is a thin veneer of white fragility, barely holding away the post-modern asbestos. It ostracizes Kyungsoo but takes in all of Jongin, laps up all of his lethargic steps and long lashes. Kyungsoo thinks that Jongin herds everything in the room together. Splayed out against the couch, Jongin is the kind of guy to belong in this sort of place, probably, or the kind of guy who has gotten used to this high class superficiality. A kind of stuffed, hollow man, shadows falling between the emotion and the response.

“You don’t like this place, do you?”

“It’s all black and white. It doesn’t look like anyone’s ho—”

“Here,” Jongin calls suddenly.

Kyungsoo almost doesn’t turn around fast enough to catch the bundle of still-packaged yellow sticky notes that Jongin tosses him. “What’s this?”

“Come on, really. You’ve got to recognize these.”

“No, I mean, why are you giving them to me?”

“You were the one who said my room is black and white,” Jongin shrugs, leans back onto his couch until the hollow of his throat is fully exposed and suddenly he’s all jagged edges of chins and cartilage and elbows, knuckles, nails, “So color it. I bet you’re dying to. And look, it’s the color of the sun. Makes you feel alive, doesn’t it?”

“You’re awful.”

“Your admonishing stare,” Jongin grins, “is my favorite.”

So Kyungsoo gives in, though only after ordering for Jongin to, “Call me hyung from now on. It’s ridiculous how unmannered you are.”

Jongin laughs dismissively, smoke exploding like glitter clouds over his head and mouth wide with glee. Pulling a chair up against the nearest wall, Kyungsoo helps himself up, half-tottering as he tears open the first package and slips his thumb under the first note. Aligning it at perfectly perpendicular angles, Kyungsoo runs his thumb over the edges and smoothes down the corners. The wall is toasted warm from the sunlight and Jongin's voice comes in a comforting hum from behind him, mists of little insignificant words drifting over wistful grimaces.

“Do you ever wonder this—how many ten o'clocks have you spent doing the same precise thing, with the same glue gun and same bucket of marbles and the toy from the day before the day before the day before all of yesterdays? How many times have you sat down at your empty dinner table and wondered if tomorrow you will remember today?”

With time Kyungsoo notices that Jongin is really not asking questions. He's answering them. Filling the footprints that Kyungsoo had left behind. Gentle and entrancing, consonants broken full-stop and vowels tapering to infinity. Gaze dipping far, far, away, lost somewhere in Kyungsoo's as Kyungsoo lights his walls ablaze in a field of golden conflagration.

“Do you ever think that you can't remember because there is nothing to remember? If you do the exact same thing every single day of the week, every week of the month, all twelve months of the year, doesn't memory lose purpose? What do you think will happen if you begin breaking the routine?”

They spend the night like this. Kyungsoo doesn't go to the bar and he doesn't sing, just listens to the course of Jongin's whispers and the murmurs of the parchment under his skin, the beats of his pulse seeping into the invisible cracks of white-washed room. The process of letting Jongin break him out of his routine is almost too easy.

At some point Kyungsoo finishes with the notes and Jongin with his questions. They're on their old spots on the couch and the arm chair, basking in the dusk, when a tune settles between them. It grows, fluid and effortless, starts from the end and ends at the start, and it makes an invisible string from Kyungsoo's tongue to the Jongin's fingertips, lifting them like marionette strings over his lap.

On their way to sleep, Kyungsoo molds the melodic lines, the a-flat, the b-sharp-minor, the Jongin look your hands are dancing, the Jongin I like you a lot; Jongin defines the meter, the four-four, the four-three, the hyung are you happy, the hyung fossilize me in your time.

Jongin's last question is a soft one, and he mutters it just as Kyungsoo's eyes flutter closed, “How many times have you neglected something really important?”

--

July is the cruelest month, and its last day the most bitter.

“The people,” Kyungsoo says, and he's so exhausted today. His bones ache and his ribs cut into his lungs and he can't breathe and everything hurts, spins, hurts, spins. “The people are gone. All of them are gone.”

Jongin keeps staring. Kyungsoo trembles and grips onto his scrapbook for life, paper crushing under his nails but maybe he wants to crush it. Maybe he doesn't really want to remember. Maybe he can get in another accident and make all of it go away, "Baekhyun he—I—I tried to find him—says here," he flips open the book and points to a weathered page, face in the photo barely distinguishable from too many glossing touches, "says here that he moved away. See, it says his number isn't in use anymore. But Baekhyun was my high school friend. Best friend. I just—I really wanted to know why he moved. Where he moved to. All I wanted to do was patch things up in case we had a fight."

"So I called his mom, and I could remember how she hugged me during graduation and told me that I'm just like a son to her, and that I'm much better behaved than Baekhyun, and that if I ever need some motherly advice I should go to her—and Baekhyun punched my shoulder and everyone was laughing and it—but when I called today she just... it was still her but she sounded... she was so... tired. Frustrated. Jongin she was *sick of me*."

"No," Jongin blanches, "You didn't really ask for Baekhyun, did you?"

"And she screamed at me, said to never call her again and then she *apologized*. To me. Because she couldn't even blame me for calling her to remind her that Byun Baekhyun's *dead*. That he was killed in the same accident as me. That I was the one who survived instead of him."

"Listen, hyung, it's really not your fault—"

"How many times have I done this, Jongin? How many times did I have to call her and ask her about where her dead son went? Jongin *what have I been doing?* Why didn't anyone just... why didn't I write it down? Why?"

Jongin doesn't answer. He shifts, barely, and slumps against the staircase railing.

"Did you know about this?" Kyungsoo asks, finally, after the seconds have stumbled into minutes, and his nerves erupt into a frantic shout when Jongin fails to answer again, "You knew about this, didn't you? Why would you *let me do this?*"

With a sigh, Jongin pries the scrapbook out of Kyungsoo's hand, "You weren't planning to write it down today, were you, hyung? You're upset but that doesn't mean that you'll do it, will you? Are you thinking that maybe all of this can go away when you wake up again?"

Though Kyungsoo makes a noise to protest, he really doesn't have anything to say. Jongin's probably right. Heavy guilt, and maybe a little rage, precipitates from the dampness in his palms.

"Afraid. You're afraid. It's better reopening someone else's wounds than running the risk of reopening your own, because time heals pain like hers, but it sure as fuck is not going to heal yours. While the rest of us move on, you're going to be stuck here all by yourself, crying about the same thing everyday. You know that. And you hate yourself for knowing it and—" Jongin grips Kyungsoo's wrist, lowers his voice until it's all ebbs and flows, "It's not your fault. Trying to protect yourself is not wrong."

Kyungsoo takes a ragged gasp and before Jongin can start again, he jerks his wrist out and

snatches back his scrapbook. Swallowing back the sting in his nose, he scribbles "*died four years ago (31 July 2012)*" over Baekhyun's cheerful grin. Maybe the handwriting is a little broken, a little shaken, blurred with little plops of saline liquid. Maybe Jongin is shaking his head. Maybe he's going to regret this every single morning from today forward.

But at least he won't be left behind.

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Jongin carries in the first morning of August and two grease-stained brown paper bags, throwing both carelessly across the tiny dining table in Kyungsoo's kitchen as he turns around to explain, "You gave me the key to your apartment yesterday."

"I know," Kyungsoo points to a note on the wall, except he thinks that he might've known even without the note. Everything about Jongin is new but familiar, abrupt but warm, in a way, like something evasive to the mind but fossilized in the sap of the soul.

"How much do you know?" Jongin asks, while pulling egg toasts out of the bags and helping himself with great familiarity around the kitchen.

"Your name is Jongin, you're my neighbor," Kyungsoo follows the beeline that Jongin makes from the cupboards to the dining room, "You used to dance, but you gave that up to be a novelist, and you have a sad smile and you're always smoking because... because you're dy—" The sound of paper ripping out of metal, as Jongin fetches the scrapbook from the kitchen counter, flips to the last page, and rips it out, is almost too raw for the ear. Kyungsoo falls silent and watches Jongin whip out a zippo and kindle a flame onto the sheet, "You don't need to know. I'm one of those pages that's going to be abandoned one day. It won't even be a pretty page. It'll be blood and tears over pulp and paper and, honestly, it's better not to have a page of me at all."

"But—"

"Just forget it."

When Jongin leaves, Kyungsoo secretly rewrites the page, dusts up the ashes and puts them in a jar. He does this not because he wants to remember Jongin from today, but because he wants the Kyungsoo tomorrow to know of the boy behind Jongin's secretive smiles today. He wants the Kyungsoo tomorrow to know that behind the Jongin who ghosts along cigarette stubs, who tosses back pills with glasses of milk, is a Jongin who can laugh with his whole face and body. A Jongin who puts his baseball caps on backwards and blows his cheeks up at unexpected moments. He's a child with an old man's scars, the gentlest romanticist hiding within a shell of hard cynicism.

Though Kyungsoo doesn't have a picture this time, he thinks that he doesn't really need one. The words come out on their own, wishes at the end of every stroke, and Kyungsoo thinks that they're more representative than any picture could be of that rare flicker of stardust in Jongin's eyes. Of the way he calls him hyung. Of the way he pulls both of their baseball caps backwards and points out how they match.

He doesn't write that Jongin is dying.

--

The man on the last page of his scrapbook is Jongin on certain days, a writer on others, and a stranger during brief elevator rides. On good days he has a smooth olive complexion; on bad days he wears jaundice over his flesh like a punishment. Sometimes he is a boy sitting on the neighboring balcony, legs dangling off the ledge and cigarette hanging on parched lips, arms poking out from behind rusted fences. Sometimes he is the tired man leaning against the wall, drowning in the rain with hair damp and back hunched. Sometimes they share a quiet second in the corridors, others countless hours speaking with lidded eyes, over thick divides of indigo smoke and ringlets of blues. Occasionally it hurts to see him, makes Kyungsoo's chest throb with something heavier than pity, but most of the time seeing the man makes Kyungsoo's head light and dizzy.

And although Kyungsoo doesn't record the details, there is always *something* when they come into contact. Every time their eyes catch, when they sprawl themselves out against the night sky, telltale grazes of knuckles between shallow breathes. It's something inexplicably warm, light, transient. A little like fireflies. The kind of something that lingers just long enough in his palms to disappear by the time he learns to want. The kind of something that tells him this has happened before, and that next time, too, they'll fly away. Slip between his fingers like fleeting memories. But this kind of something is probably not romantic. "Love you," are two words that are never said. They're too definitive, too abrupt without motive, solid evidence, rationalized explanations because at the end of each day sometimes Jongin is a stranger, sometimes Jongin is a book, but he is never more than a friend. Time keeps them at arm's length, an invisible and impenetrable divide.

Days come and go and Kyungsoo finds the border between *don't go* and *good night*. Of course Kyungsoo is always dying to reach out and draw Jongin back in. He thinks that they've fit before, even though between them there is no entangling of toes or mazes of interlocked fingers. There is only the tsunami of text and slow wave of music. And maybe that's all they are.

With a tick of the second hand he always steps back into, "Good night."

With Kyungsoo and Jongin there is probably no romance, not in the usual definition of the word. But maybe there is a little of something else, between comfort and need, between hope and faith, between the nape of Kyungsoo's neck and the creases of Jongin's palm.

--

They're two souls floating on a rooftop of Samsung Tower, seventy-three floors up into the night, almost high enough to blow stars into constellations, yet still too close to earth. Kyungsoo counts the number of pills left in Jongin's plastic orange bottle while Jongin watches smoke ripple into the air and dissipate.

"What's it like?"

“What’s what like?”

“Being forgotten.”

Jongin tucks his hand underneath his head, and they gaze up together at the obscured moon and stars embedded in the clouds. He works his jaw up and down silently for a few seconds before the answer finally pops, a croaked, “It’s like being killed. Wiped out and deleted against your will.”

“And what’s it like forgetting?”

Kyungsoo looks deep into the sky, “It’s like dying, too,” and never before has he wished so bad to live just a little longer. Their knees touch. Kyungsoo inhales the smoke that Jongin exhales. Tonight they smell of ink and rain and cotton and street-side snacks, metallic fall, and each other.

“You know,” Jongin turns, a flicker of absence over his expression, “hyung, when I used to dance, I liked the assistant. He was Chinese. Lu Han. My first love, I suppose. I respected him, followed after him, and he took care of me. And then one day I broke. Cracked under the pressure and pain and I was sick of everything. I took it out on him. He tried to fix me. Everyone tried to fix me. But you know, fixing a person isn’t like fixing a toy. When you fix a person you put yourself up to be broken.”

One of them swallows, louder than Jongin’s whisper, “And I shattered him into too many pieces.”

“My editor—Oh Sehun—he’s an ass. But he’s efficient. Puts me back together even if it’s in the wrong way and my head’s glued on backwards. The point is he shoves all of my pieces together so I don’t lose anything. We stick together. He keeps me like a stray dog, I guess, he’s good for me.”

“And, then one day he tells me, he’s dating someone from a ballet company. I go, okay, cool, but dancers can be melodramatic. And he goes, no, this one’s great, his name is Lu Han, you two should meet up, didn’t you say you used to dance?”

“Oh—”

“So we met up. It was inevitable. But you know what? He still remembers what kind of coffee I drank. Eight years and he didn’t even try to forget me. He looks like crap even if he’s in love with Sehun. You know why? It’s the memories. They’re killing him. I can’t save him from them. Neither can Sehun,” Jongin grimaces, and suddenly the smoke no longer flows but sputters from his teeth, “No one can save anyone from their memories.”

It’s clear what Jongin is getting at. Kyungsoo attempts fighting his next words, but it’s ultimately impossible.

“It’s good that you won’t remember me, really, because this way I can save you. This way when I fuck up, you won’t have to carry it. Being forgotten isn’t unbearable compared to being remembered. I can stand dying at the end of each day, hyung. It’s okay to forget me.”

Kyungsoo doesn’t hear Jongin’s loud, “I’m dying anyway,” that gets lost somewhere in the stars; instead he hears the muted, “don’t let me die,” in the fingers that Jongin laces into his own. So



he leans over and presses their noses together, gives Jongin his oxygen and the scent of tic tacs on his tongue, and takes away a lungful of nicotines shadows and ground pain killers and bitter opioids.

“You know why you always look so old? Because you think that nothing is worth remembering, because nothing is ideal, and you’re right—nothing is ideal. But every moment is worth remembering, Jongin. Every time you fuck up I’ll get to see a human, every time you fall I’ll get to see love washing you ashore... and I don’t care if in eight years I’ll look like crap. It might be because I don’t have any memories, and I can’t really be hurt, but—for me—to love and hurt and break myself down for someone worth it—”

Jongin cups Kyungsoo’s jaw and tilts his chin and their first memory is of one kissing away the disquiet. And strangely, it is one that Kyungsoo cannot bring himself to record.

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“Listen, there was a time before when I said that I wanted to write about you,” Jongin says. The sand shifts over their toes; distant mutters of the sea carries his voice away, “The thing was, though, I didn’t really want to write about you. I wasn’t trying to write at all, I mean. Writing is about observing, but I was trying to persuade and... this time I want to observe. I want to learn about you.”

Kyungsoo waits for Jongin to stop coughing to respond, “But I’ve been telling you about me. All afternoon. And if I’ve been telling you about me for two months, I’m not sure what there is left to —”

His sentence stops on a verb when Jongin puts his hand on his neck. Jongin rekindles it on a conjunction when Kyungsoo gapes with surprise. A grin lights up his entire face, small and somehow ear to ear, no teeth but brighter than the moon and all of the stars, as Jongin says, “But there is still a whole character you haven’t told me about. You’ve told me about the Kyungsoo at twenty years old. Kimchi spaghetti, dry jokes, lunches by the tree trunk. The one who died. You haven’t told me, though, about *hyung*, the one who is living, who sings perfectly off-tune songs in a bar, who lives every single day like his last and first.”

“I—” Kyungsoo begins, and that is when it dawns that he has nothing to say. Jongin’s hand is warm and heavy and perfect on his neck.

“I want to learn about you, *hyung*. Not the you yesterday, or the you tomorrow. I want to learn about the you today. I want to know how you feel, why you didn’t go to the bar today, what your first thought was when you woke up, if you’re ticklish...”

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“I’m ticklish,” and Kyungsoo has no idea what he’s doing when he puts his hand on top of Jongin’s, and feels the flux of warmth into his palm, “And I like your hand here. It’s horrible. In a nice way.”

Jongin probably meant to laugh, but at some point the laughter decomposed into coughs that double both of them over. And while they sprawl out over the beach side by side, sand in hair and ocean in their fingers, Kyungsoo caresses Jongin's neck, feels the air wheezing in and out, and closes his eyes, "I want to learn about you, too. Today, I don't want to forget you."

So Jongin helps him remember, traces all of the lines and angles and pasts and futures of Kim Jongin into Kyungsoo's skin with lips and lashes. Sleep is like wax, polyester, styrofoam, wool, graphite, and it wraps him up before he can reach back and try to grasp the ends of Jongin's toes and fingers.

"Tomorrow," Kyungsoo says, at the periphery of dream and reality. Jongin's hand ghosts along his collarbones, soothing his prayers, "I want to see you dance."

"Why?"

"When you talk about it, it's like you light up a little... I want to see you light up completely. Glowing. Overflowing with it. Like fireflies?"

When Kyungsoo wakes up again, there is sand in the ridges of his toes, the ocean in the ends of his hair, and fireflies in his room. Dozens of little fireflies in the darkness before dawn, twinkling like stars in the water, shining into his little bedroom with the ceiling too low and walls too close. He stares perplexed at their presence, but even more by a strange urge to fall back on his pillow and laugh.

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"I'm here to pick you up," says the man at the door. His name is Jongin, Kyungsoo thinks, but he can't remember where he's heard that name before. And as he frowns and checks his notes, Jongin grabs him close and pecks him on the lips, "This should be a better reminder."

Before Kyungsoo has a chance to push him away, though whether or not he would have pushed him at all is doubtful, Jongin has gotten his arm slung around Kyungsoo's neck and began dragging him out the apartment, "Come on, let's go."

"Where are we—" Kyungsoo yelps as Jongin practically throws him over the window pane of a filthy-rich looking convertible, a treacherous little thing parked up against the curb, all black exteriors and plush white interiors, not even bothering to open the door, "going?"

"To see fireflies," Jongin says, muffling coughs in his sleeves, and it's only when Kyungsoo buckles up and looks over does he realize that the boy is grinning from ear to ear, "Real ones."

"Where are we going? Is there a field around here?" He asks, but Jongin doesn't say much, only turns up the radio and blasts pop tunes to fill up the air, and maybe to obscure his obscenely pleased smile.

The car speeds from lanky alleys to the shadows of skyscrapers and the grassy suburbs, deeper into the night. Somewhere along the lines Kyungsoo notices Jongin sticking his free arm out the side, dangling loosely off the window pane, and finds the nerve to do the same. The wind rubs away the nerves in his skin and breathes in sparks in their hair. It's a small thrill, but big enough

of one to make his heart beat a tad faster. Kyungsoo begins singing, voice excited and distinct over the radio, and he knows that Jongin is watching how the invisible currents swirl behind his digits. Ebbs and flows with the color of his wandering melodies.

Except instead of driving to a field, or even a park, Jongin cuts the ignition in front of an abandoned warehouse. Kyungsoo turns to him gaping, "I thought you said we were going to see fire—"

"Wait," Jongin interrupts, and Kyungsoo understands that he's not going to be briefed on this until after it happens, so he lets Jongin drag him out the car with fingers looped almost too easily between his, promising things about colored smoke and light and magic that seem to have very little to do with actual firebugs.

Indeed it has virtually almost nothing to do insects, and almost everything to do with a pair of transparent gloves and an explosion of flames over them and an uneven smirk over Jongin's lips as he orders Kyungsoo to pay attention. The door slams, moonlight dims, and Kyungsoo loses his breath.

Jongin is a fleeting glimpse of hard muscles and fluid grace gliding through space, but more than that, there are literally lines of fucking *light* streaking out of his palms. Rivers of glowing green and yellow and blue light gushing out of his hands and floating like neon smoke and water. He paints his fingers with a close, shimmering precision.

There's no music, just the hushed melody in their lungs: Kyungsoo's infinite inhales, long diminuendos when he remembers to breathe at all; Jongin's quick exhales, sharp crescendos when moist heels slide against wet cement and palms slice the ebbs and flows of liquid fluorescence into the night.

And then Jongin makes a gesture for Kyungsoo to come closer, a simple tilt of the forefinger really, but Kyungsoo's heart is in his throat as he wobbles up and it nearly jumps out when Jongin suddenly runs his hand down the front of his shirt, a sweeping line from his neck to his chest with open palms. Though the colors are ethereal and vanish into the air, Jongin's touch lingers behind hot and unforgettable.

"Real fireflies," Jongin grins, "Light people up from the inside out."

"What are you even saying?" Kyungsoo laughs, and even harder when he catches Jongin flushing from the neck up.

Jongin's answer begins with a stammer but disappears under a bout of fitful coughs and shaking, folded shoulders. There are beads of perspiration over his forehead.

Somehow, it doesn't look right.

--

There are one hundred and twenty-two kilometers from Jongin's midair mansion to Kyungsoo's rundown bar, and somewhere in there Kyungsoo grips Jongin's hand over the steering wheel and pulls them over, "Are you okay?"

“What do you mean?”

“The pills—Tessalon Perles, Phenergan, Codeine, and how do you even pronounce this one? And your coughing, and what’s—?” Kyungsoo tugs the little plastic half-mooned thing in the glove’s compartment, “You—is this a—vomit container?”

Jongin blanches, “No, it’s not.”

“You’re sick, aren’t you?”

The drone silence is the loudest thing Kyungsoo has ever heard. Finally Jongin shifts away, looks into the distance. Kyungsoo watches the way his Adam apple jumps up, hesitates, and drops, and he suddenly regrets asking. Everything breaks, crackling along the seams as he croaks a tepid, “What is it? It’s not terminal, is—”

“My lungs.”

There is nothing in the air but heavy breathing, and maybe a hinge of a sob in Kyungsoo’s throat.

“How many, how many months—days—?” He asks, wearily, more tired than the ashes crumbling off the end of Jongin’s cigarette. Lighting up and fading into gray. Lighting up and fading. Fading.

“The doctor said, two years,” and Jongin tries to smile, with the joint between his lips, hanging like mockery and sadness, “It’s a pretty long time, considering I’ve only been alive for twent—”

“No. Stop smoking.”

Blinking slowly, Jongin falls into a little trickle of cracked sniggers. The uneasiness is tangible.

“What are you going to do about it? I’m dying anyway. Two years, two and a half years, what’s the big difference? It’s just a matter of time, and it’s not like it would matter for you, anyway, it’s not like you can remember what we did—”

His jaw is blunt and hard against Kyungsoo’s knuckles and Kyungsoo almost can’t believe that he’s just punched Jongin as the man flies back and bumps his head against the headrest. His cigarette falls and settles on the seat.

“This,” trembling, teeth chattering, Kyungsoo picks the joint up and watches the smoke twirl, “this is what I’m going to do about it,” and stuffs it in his mouth. The flame is still there and the pain of being burnt is not the searing kind, but the spearing kind. It’s the sort that rips through Kyungsoo’s flesh, the kind of pain that slices every nerve and hurts, really hurts.

Jongin’s eyes are unwavering as Kyungsoo chews and swallows the cigarette, flints of tobacco and paper and filter rough as knives across burn wounds. Smoke seeps down his throat and he chokes a little, tears welling up cold behind his eyes. The tobacco tastes of dirt and medicine and it tastes worse under Jongin’s expressionless stare.

“The next time I see you smoking,” Kyungsoo gulps it all down, tongue screaming in agony as it presses against the roof of his mouth, “I’m going to do this again. Because, yeah, yeah, it’s not like time matters to me. It’ll be the same if I die today or tomorrow, really, wouldn’t it? If you think you’ve got the right to cut yourself off from me, why wouldn’t I?”

“You’re so fucking dumb, hyung.”

Kyungsoo is in too much pain to answer, but he kind of agrees.

--

“It’s weird, that writer guy doesn’t smoke anymore,” Minseok remarks the first night that Kyungsoo shows up to the bar in weeks, apparently. He takes a quick sip of water and glances at the musicians before turning back to Kyungsoo, “He used to smoke them by the handfuls, I swear. And the expensive suit, too. It’s like he’s a different guy.”

Curling his tongue absentmindedly to stroke at the burn mark that he’d gotten some time ago, Kyungsoo traces Minseok’s gaze to a man biting down a patronizing grin, seated across the room. It’s half-past twelve, and the bar is bustling full of people and chatter, but the seconds their eyes catch all Kyungsoo can see is that man and the shape of his lips, the dark glint under his lashes. The entire room empties in the flash of a second until all that is left is Kyungsoo and the man in the leather jacket. Quiet, colorless, surreal.

At some point the music starts and Minseok nurses a tune. Kyungsoo moves his jaw up and down on instinct, because he knows that it’s his cue to join. The microphone heavy in his palm and he waits for his voice, only nothing comes out. Dry croaks and quick blinks and panic seeps in, further when he hears Minseok tapping the floor in impatience.

The man across the room arches his brows, mouths something that Kyungsoo doesn’t quite understand, and lifts a hand tentatively. Perplexed, Kyungsoo watches his fingers dance through the air, and then somehow the sound of a piano ghosts from nowhere, glitters loud and clear and it all comes together, everything sinks in. The melody travels through the man’s body, guiding it into corners and curves and Kyungsoo thinks that he is the most beautiful man, most beautiful artist on the planet. The melodies flow from the man’s fingertips and into his heart almost as if that was the sole purpose of its existence.

It’s a night in a month like September, or maybe October, when Kyungsoo delivers his best performance to a dancer in a leather jacket. And afterwards, as Kyungsoo waits for Minseok to divide the tips, the dancer makes his way past the tables with a bashful smile, “I don’t have an umbrella.”

Kyungsoo blinks, suddenly aware of the rain drumming against the window. Minseok nudges him, “He says he doesn’t have an umbrella.”

Kyungsoo keeps blinking until eventually the dancer sighs and slings his arm around Kyungsoo’s neck carelessly, clearly a gesture that he’s done more than once before, and begins dragging him out, “Come on, come on. Walk me home, hyung.”

At the mention of ‘hyung’, Kyungsoo immediately thinks of the last page in his scrapbook, the one without a photo, about a man who is really a boy, a writer who is really a dancer, a neighbor who is really much more. Kim Jongin. The page had a note on the side that said to pretend to have never read it, because Kim Jongin doesn’t want to be remembered.

So Kyungsoo pretends that he doesn't know that Jongin is his neighbor, "Where do you live?"

"I know you know."

"I swear I don't."

"In your apartment."

"No really."

"Yes really."

Kyungsoo grumbles, Jongin smirks, and Kyungsoo knows that he has no alternative but to take him there.

Seoul at one o'clock smells of damp earth, drenched windbreakers, and Jongin's fabric softener. Kyungsoo offers to hold the umbrella, perhaps so that his knuckles can brush against Jongin's shoulder when they come too close in their unparallel lines. They're in a relationship appropriately summarized by two slender silhouettes, shoulders barely grazing, feet pattering down wet sidewalks somewhere between dusk and dawn. It's a picture full of adolescent naivety, adolescent blushes and anxieties and sudden pronouncements of, "I like you," and "what are you saying," and "I'm going to kiss you," and rough lips, gentle caresses, mouth smiling and fumbling against knuckles and wrists.

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"Isn't it kind of boring using only one color?" Jongin remarks as Kyungsoo darts from one end of the bedroom to the other, straightening out and reorganizing and dusting off all of the details because everything looks horrendous with a guest around.

"It would be a headache otherwise," Kyungsoo responds, smoothing out the last wrinkles in his comforter.

"Yeah, but you can't tell what's important like this. Everything's green. Like a lawn. You've got grass on your wall," Jongin laughs awkwardly at his own joke while Kyungsoo gives up on cleaning and slumps down on the rug, "Alright, humorless today, are we."

"So you... what... are you?" Kyungsoo doesn't exactly broach the subject, because he already knows the answer and really it's all formalities, pretending not to know Jongin when he feels like he does and when he has memorized every line about him in the scrapbook.

"I'm a writer."

"I thought you were a dancer?"

"I used to," Jongin picks his way across the room, bending his neck slightly because the ceiling is too low, and drops himself next to Kyungsoo. Their feet fit together perfectly, toes scarcely bumping and all the lines aligned, "When I was young, I did some ballet."

Kyungsoo asks for Jongin to explain what ballet is like, because he's never seen it before, and Jongin decides to do a live demonstration with his fingers, "So here's the head and these are the legs and, ready, set, go—," an arabesque, he calls it, "and when they jump like this," it's called a grand jeté, and "give me your palm," a twirl of the wrist, spinning nails dig laughter out of

Kyungsoo's palm, "fouetté en tourant," and his smile disappears into curious fixation as Jongin's fingers skitter to the edge of his palm and over to the back, "here a sissonne, one, and a two, and—," they both stop breathing momentarily, when his fingers cross Kyungsoo's wrist and up his forearm, arm, shoulder, collarbone, neck, lower lip, stop.

Jongin pries a smile open on Kyungsoo's mouth with a thumb, and leans in to smear it away with his own and it's a sweet, chaste kiss that Kyungsoo reels in.

But when Jongin's hand slips around his waist to bring him in closer, Kyungsoo jerks away with a gasp, "Wait, no."

Still dazed, Jongin stares holes into Kyungsoo's mouth as he scampers away, perches on the side of his worktable uncomfortably, "I don't even... I don't know you. I mean—I mean, I don't really remember..." and he trails off when Jongin stands up, grabs his hand, and raises it over his chest. He feels Jongin's thundering heartbeat, and Jongin's thin pulse, and Jongin's whispers over his earlobe.

"Listen," Jongin says, "this is me, in love with you," and he brings their hands over Kyungsoo's chest, and Kyungsoo is suddenly aware of how hard his own heart is pounding out of his chest and the sudden heat in his cheeks, "and this, it sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it?"

There is game in Jongin's eyes and a challenge in the small partition between his lips and Kyungsoo has no idea what he's doing, but the moment Jongin puts his hand over his kneecap everything combusts, turns into fingers digging into back of necks and messes of tongues and breathlessness and bumping knees against hips. It's almost natural to break all of the invisible barriers between them, reach across and touch the reality over one another's flesh. Guide hand over hand and lips over lips and they fit so perfect together, crevices into slopes and speed into hesitation. Fall in one another endlessly until they've hit the pit bottom, until Jongin has gotten him backed up against the wall, legs bumping the inner seams of his thighs and breath scalding over the base of his neck.

Kyungsoo forgets to breathe when Jongin shocks the silence, ripping his zipper open and pulling down his jeans and briefs at once. He doesn't know where to look, really, because he's never done this before, and Jongin seems more than familiar with the procedures as he fists Kyungsoo, dragging hot fingers until Kyungsoo is so hard it almost hurts. He bucks, on instinct, and Jongin seems to notice the way he's gripping back and studies Kyungsoo from under his lashes, "It's okay, we'll go slow."

Though the definition of slow might be subjective, Kyungsoo is positive that Jongin is stepping out of bounds when he opens his mouth and closes it around his cock, immediately sliding further down the shaft, lips furious and scalding and intoxicating, tongue flicking across the slit and rubbing impatiently up the underside of his cock. Throwing his head back, Kyungsoo thrusts uncertainly into Jongin's mouth, though the uncertainty ends the moment Jongin moans and the knot of pleasure unravels into his guts. From there it's about heat and moans, nail bed scraping

against scalps and whimpers prefixes to sharply gasped, “Jongin, Jongin,” and low moans suffixes to muffled shudders behind clenched teeth.

When Kyungsoo is about to come, Jongin pulls away and crushes him against the wall, mouth fervent and hot and whispering fast instructions about, “take my pants,” between, “off, now” jolts of, “hurry,” electricity, “hyung.” As Kyungsoo follows his orders to the syllable, Jongin peels away his shirt, throwing it anywhere before awarding Kyungsoo with a light trail of kisses from his mouth to his jaw and lower, down his neck and off his shoulder, skittering along the length of his arm until he finds the junction between the fingers. Slowly, with his eyes squared in Kyungsoo’s, he sucks off their fingers together. As Kyungsoo reels in the warmth of Jongin’s tongue, Jongin pushes him over the bed.

The first digit that Jongin inserts into Kyungsoo hurts, the second one is blind agony, and Kyungsoo waits for Jongin to nip the pain away, distracting little pecks spiraled along his neck. He relaxes in time for Jongin to thrust in deeper, and that is when his hips jerk up on their own. A strong wave of pleasure punches him numb and inarticulate; his jaw drops but nothing comes out. Jongin remembers the spot and when he replaces his fingers with his cock it’s the same damned spot that he hits, the same spot that makes Kyungsoo let go of everything. A noise between a grunt and a scream comes out from his throat. Jongin squeezes his thigh before thrusting in again and faster, rougher, over, and over until Kyungsoo comes in streaks of white over his stomach, and keeps going until a sudden, sharp, grunt.

As they fall back onto the bed together, Kyungsoo worries himself about perhaps folding up the clothes that Jongin has tossed everywhere, and Jongin about wrapping his arms around Kyungsoo’s waist in the perfect way. The rim of Kyungsoo’s starched shirt, scented of cigarette fumes and the wet transition between fall and winter, wrinkles at the ridge between their hips. Jongin slowly slides his hand down the buttons, unclipping each one with the leisure of time and the faint buzz of pleasure in his throat, “You know, I never told you my name was Jongin. How did you remember?”

Kyungsoo flushes, face turning pink to red as he tries to bury his head into the pillow, “You knew, didn’t you, that I have a page about you in my book?”

“Of course I did,” Jongin mutters, and Kyungsoo wonders why it sounds as if he’s been wheezing—wheezing this whole time, maybe since the beginning, “I have the key to your apartment, and no sense of privacy or obedience. But you don’t seem to have any either, seeing as you wrote us down even though I told you not to.”

“But I would keep writing,” Kyungsoo says, “I want to remember us. I really—I want to have—I want to just—a relationship. I want to have a real relationship with you, where we can talk about what we did yesterday or the day before that...”

Jongin says nothing, only buries his nose in the nape of Kyungsoo’s neck, breathing heavily still. “Tomorrow, tomorrow please, don’t let me forget you, Jongin. I want to remember this, I want to



remember us.”

“Don’t worry, hyung. I’m a writer. I remember things for a living.”

They stay up all night. Jongin makes cups of over-soaked tea and they drink them on Kyungsoo’s balcony, legs extended and overlapping, toes fidgeting against toes. Kyungsoo tries to talk about everything he can think of, anything to keep awake because when he falls asleep it will all be over, the beautiful stars and the warm fuzz in him and the amazing smoothness of Jongin’s skin gliding down his own, the stark contrasts. He rambles about how nice Jongin looked when he danced in the bar like that, how perfect their voices and movements fit together, how the sky is so clear and how the weatherman said it would rain tomorrow.

But eventually, Kyungsoo’s eyes grow unbearably heavy and he slumps against Jongin, semi-conscious of the cool breeze teasing his skin and the lines Jongin draws into his neck. Jongin puts Kyungsoo’s head in his lap and strokes his hair, continuing Kyungsoo’s words as if they’ve never stopped, because maybe things don’t have to end so quick. Because he, too, is hoping. Sleep takes Kyungsoo away, anyway.

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In the last seconds of summer, hours are always too short and seconds too long. The days are growing shorter and though Kyungsoo can’t say that he has any proof, trepidation gnaws at him with every sunset and he can feel it lingering over him. Filling the creases of his skin, gliding down his spine, dripping off his toes. A longing. A fear. The sinking cold of winter, the rain without a beginning, the same hours that he knows he’s passed once before. And then night swarms in and paints everything blank.

prologue: *daisies*; part one: *lost and stuck*; part two: *invisible walls*; part three: *tomorrow*; word count: 8,425

Sunlight drifts into Kyungsoo's dream, refracts into something cool and salty and maybe involving heels digging into the soft overlap between ocean and beach. He turns and the wet sand transforms into warm linens.

When he opens his eyes the cocktail of seagull wings and shades of blue are replaced by a ceiling, meters too low, a small window at the end of a narrow bedroom, and peeling wood floorboards under worn rugs. It's his room, albeit not exactly the same as it was yesterday, because there are now green and yellow sticky notes pasted over every inch of every wall. Notes that he can't recall having placed: a second skin of colored texts and diagrams, numbers and dates. A breeze lifts the curtains and ruffles them, plays a melody in the tune of drizzled paper applause.

Though Kyungsoo is unsurprised by the state of his room, somehow he is taken aback by the overwhelming number of yellow notes. The confusion, however, fades automatically into a smile when he climbs onto the balcony and notices a figure leaning on the adjacent railings.

"Have you read the yellow ones?" The stranger asks abruptly, glint in his pupils turning mischievous as he notes Kyungsoo's matte stare, "Go back and read them. And open your door when I knock."

So Kyungsoo goes back, reads them, and opens the door when Jongin knocks. Ten minutes later they're bent over the kitchen sink making breakfast while Jongin pokes his stomach, counting the ridges of his ribs, ruining everything the perfect way. Uneasy stops and easy goes, crawling along with arms around waists and chins sunk into shoulders.

Maybe this can repeat forever, Kyungsoo thinks. Maybe one day he'll wake up an old man and Jongin will still poke him in the stomach, breathe incoherent teases into his ear, and make a mess out of everything just like today. They'll eat breakfast over the balcony, wrinkled feet in fluffy slippers and gray hair too thin to hide bright smiles. He would like that.

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Lovemaking between Kyungsoo and Jongin is summarized by nondescript etches over fraying pages, compiled in a little list that Jongin has titled *Things that Turn Do Kyungsoo on*. On odd days there are spontaneous combustions at the drop of a pen, even days there is Jongin molding his hands to the texture of Kyungsoo's goosebumps.

Mainly they're made of regular nights at the bar, when everyone else has abandoned them to a glass of untouched Scotch as arbitrator. Kyungsoo finds himself staring stupidly at Jongin's face while he sings, contemplating how it's possible for someone to look so flawless and broken at once. Beautiful as inkworks, happiness spilling over the contours like aged tea, Jongin is like an

artifact of lost perfection—though the perfection part bites the dust as soon as he looks up and, catching Kyungsoo’s wide-eyed gaze, winks.

There’s something about Jongin’s wink that makes Kyungsoo almost drop his microphone, and certainly the time signature of the song. It doesn’t take long before Kyungsoo crops off entirely, because that is when Jongin has closed the distance between them, pretty lips breathing blues over sleek perspiration. Kyungsoo’s heart thuds against his chest with every semi-intentional bump of the wrists and whisper of, “I dare you, really.”

The game of dares turns lethal when the lounge door shuts and leaves Jongin crushing Kyungsoo into the wall, “Say that again? You dare me?” Palms and knees skimming up thighs, incoherent mumbles punctuating every whine and whimper. Urgency runs everything over while frustration guides hands down metal zippers. Or maybe not frustration.

Maybe just urgency, because they’re always in a rush for the grains of sand vanishing from the creases of their palms. Because as winter folds into spring, lovemaking is less about sharp thrusts and smoldering gazes, and more about humid silences trapped between the sheets in Jongin’s apartment. Because as spring comes, the crests disappears and leave only a steady stream of troughs.

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Kyungsoo stretches over Jongin’s mattress, watching the curtains blow life into hundreds of yellow sticky notes over the walls, while Jongin meets the hollow of his throat with both thumbs. A distracted whisper fractures the calm, “I’m sorry.”

The air resonates not of Jongin’s little apology, but of the gasps of air whistling into his lungs. Sliding his hand under Jongin’s starched shirt, Kyungsoo counts the number of Jongin’s ribs with his forefinger. He leaves behind little prints of sticky perspiration and come, soothing “one, two, three—”s. Jongin jumps, startled, while Kyungsoo pecks the surprise off his lips, “*Shhh*. Don’t be sorry.”

It takes Jongin a very long time before he relaxes into Kyungsoo’s ministrations, allowing the other to smother his palms down his sides and paint him in warmth and comfort, “It’s just that I can’t even, properly, *love* you.”

Kyungsoo snorts, digs his finger sharply between the ribs, and Jongin erupts with laughter, which Kyungsoo skillfully cups with both hands and caps under a longer, fuller kiss. There is a faint shadow of violet under their bodies as Kyungsoo pulls away, letting the hues of his sigh drift lethargically. “Jongin, listen. I don’t care about sex. It’s more than good enough, like this. We’re already making love.”

Jongin buries his face in the pillow. Kyungsoo pries him out. Jongin looks away. Kyungsoo forces his face back. Eventually Jongin breaks into an embarrassed chortle, “You’re killing me, hyung. You’re really killing me.”

“Why?”

There is no response, so Kyungsoo thinks that maybe it's just another one of those things that Jongin says for no reason. One of those things that comes and goes. As the sky darkens, the question dissipates together with the light, and it doesn't return again.

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"Where does a thought go when it's forgotten?"

"I don't know. Away?"

"That's vague."

"I'm not a writer."

"Don't be vague."

"Well, it dies. The thought dies."

"What if I don't want to?" Jongin flicks his zippo open and shut, watching the tongue fire flick around the steel cap. "Don't let me die, hyung. Promise me you'll remember me."

"Okay. I promise. I'll remember you."

"Forever."

"Forever."

There are times that the truth hurts more than the lie, and times when the lie itself is painful enough to rip Kyungsoo apart.

"Will you love me tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"Promise me that."

"I'll love you tomorrow, and I'll remember you forever. Just give me the lighter before you burn my apartment down."

Jongin writes him a note to hold him to their promise, "*My name is Jongin. I'm the writer who lives next door. See you tomorrow, hyung. Don't forget!*" Kyungsoo laughs at the exclamation mark and Jongin punches his shoulder and they roll together, under the covers, over a slight slope of hope. Kyungsoo figures then that lies are also what pieces Jongin together, so maybe he can lie a little.

The hope ends, eventually, and the lies fail. Jongin's voice is small and lonely as he mutters into Kyungsoo's hair, "I only have two things in this world, hyung. It's just you and dancing. That's all I've got going for me, and soon, they're going to carve the dance out of my bones, and, eventually, they'll take you, too..."

Kyungsoo lets Jongin snake his hand around his neck and draw him into an embrace. The fire flicks off and the darkness settles. It's raining out. Pitter-patter on the windowsill.

--

There are moments when Kyungsoo watches Jongin dance that he notices how Jongin's movements lag behind, not significantly but just enough. Hesitant bucks of the joints, fear and desire in the tell-tale hesitation. It's as if his muscles are straining for something that his tendons

hold back, as if he's caught perpetually chasing some melody that is always a beat faster. Jongin probably knows it himself; the glimmer of frustration and grief dilating in his pupils is unmistakable.

But eventually, even those moments disappear. There is no more frustration or grief, no movement, no struggle, not really. Just an apparition sitting on the other end of the bar. Disintegrating slowly into particles of dust and light.

Then there are the moments when Kyungsoo sings that he notices the clenching and unclenching of Jongin's fist. The bite marks in his lower lip, the downcast eyes, the surrendered shoulders. Everything comes apart not with a shout, but with the inevitable gasp for air. Gently, steadily, inevitably.

And ultimately, the sentence that describes Jongin as a dancer in the back of the scrapbook becomes something like a lie, because Jongin doesn't dance anymore. He's not really a writer, either. He doesn't seem to be the man in the page. He doesn't seem to be a human at all, perhaps just a corpse repeating at the end of every hour, "Hyung, do you remember when...?"

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Kyungsoo is hanging between being suffocated and scalded by a midsummer's night as he steps into the elevator. The stranger already inside nods a terse greeting. It's the 12th of July, a moment when the world runs on uncertain lamplights, drunken howls, and the occasional punch of laughter. There are just the two of them at this hour, and an obtrusive kind of peace. Having just returned from the bar, Kyungsoo tries to fight off the cocktail of metallic smoke and the thick scent of alcohol caught in his hair. The last ringlets of saxophone nestle over his fingers and cinquillo beat lingers under his skin, but none of it is enough to fill the abyss that stands between him and the stranger.

The stranger, with an unlit cigarette between his teeth, turns first. The unflattering elevator lighting enshrouds him in jaundice yellow, a heavy veil of lethargy. Kyungsoo wonders, with the cinquillo pounding into his veins, if the man's skin is as plastic as it seems.

"Hot. The weather. It's hot," he says, proffering a hand that Kyungsoo grabs with hesitation. His grasp is surprisingly cold, long fingers and nails cut short and sharp, leathery skin stretched taut over gaunt knuckles. But more than that, he's trembling, Kyungsoo realizes. His teeth are chattering and he can barely make eye contact.

"Um," Kyungsoo balks. He wants to ask if the stranger's okay, why he's shaking like that, but between the creaks of the elevator flooring and sputters of the fluorescent light bulb, the words are lost, "Yeah. Yeah. Hot tonight."

The stranger says nothing. Instead he leans back on the elevator walls and lets his eyes glide down the length of Kyungsoo's figure, as if he's waiting for Kyungsoo to recognize him. It's the kind of attention that makes Kyungsoo draw back behind his jacket, though a thin layer of cashmere does little to hide him. Time stands on its toes until the doors open, when Kyungsoo

lets out a gasp of air he didn't know he was holding in.

Only later, after Kyungsoo has worked his way down the apartment corridors and noted that the stranger has trailed after him, does he realize that it's probably not the first time they've met.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" He finally asks, voice echoing uneasily down the long hallways. The stranger has stopped at the neighboring door, twirling a keychain around his forefinger. A sliver of moonlight works in from the railings and gleams off of something on his suit. Kyungsoo notes a pair of cufflinks, shiny and expensive-looking, too expensive-looking to belong to someone who would live in this kind of residence.

"Do you?" The stranger frowns, and it resounds much more of a plea than a request.

Kyungsoo picks the lint in his pocket. He doesn't remember coming upon the stranger's face in the scrapbook or the rows of green notes on his walls. But perhaps he skipped a page. It's happened before. He hurriedly reaches for his bag, and is stopped with a bark of laughter, "So you don't remember. Nothing at all?"

"What? What am I supposed to remember?"

"Nothing. Really, nothing," The stranger laughs, or maybe sobs, as he slumps against the neighboring door and slides down, down, down. Even in the dark, the twinkle of fear gleaming from his crooked grin is distinct. It makes him look younger than he seems, almost sadly so.

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The watermelon tastes of grimy windows and the air of some kind of invisible, dimming melody decomposing at the veins. Kyungsoo finds it hard to swallow. Everything is imperceptible today, teetering by the edge of existence.

"Jongin," he says, picking out the black seeds with careful forefingers, "Why are you so quiet?"

"I've always been quiet," Jongin responds.

They're sitting cross-legged on Kyungsoo's balcony, mildewed walls behind them and an unending country of suburbs etherized before. Kyungsoo feels like all of it is just a film set built out of dust and cracking dreams. There must be a real world somewhere out there, where laughter doesn't seem an impossibility on the barren desolation of Jongin's face.

"No you haven't."

"You wouldn't know. It's not like you remember."

"Why are you so upset?"

"I'm not."

"You are."

Jongin bites angrily into a chunk of watermelon. Trickle of juice run down the side of his mouth and he smears them away roughly with the back of his hand. He's upset, that much is clear, Kyungsoo decides, or perhaps a little more than upset. Waiting patiently, Kyungsoo picks up the sound of Jongin biting, chewing, swallowing, hitching for air. But Jongin doesn't break out of the routine, only continues eating faster and faster.

“Look, what did I say wrong? Jongin, I want to have a relationship with you but you can’t be like this—”

“No, hyung. I can, because we don’t even *have* a fucking relationship,” Jongin suddenly snaps, brittle and cold, “And we’re never going to have a relationship. You get it, don’t you? You can keep trying but you’re never going to remember me. That’s just the way it is.”

Kyungsoo doesn’t want to cry, but a little whimper cracks his poker-faced façade and screws everything up. Jongin grows angrier, “You don’t even have a right to be upset. You wake up each morning and you’re all fine and dandy but what about me?”

“I’m sorr—”

“*I’m in love with you*, damn it, but I still have to introduce myself to you every fucking morning and do you even understand how that *feels*?—No, you don’t, because you don’t actually love me. Without all my notes, there is nothing. There is actually, exactly, really nothing. I’m really just a stranger to you, and this relationship is all just a play. It’s just another novel. Fabrication. Everything. I’m not even writing a fucking novel, fuck, *I’m living it.*”

After a long pause, “I’m sorry,” unwinds eventually, from one of them. Maybe both of them.

“Two nights ago, I went through and took off all the notes about us in your apartment, and yesterday, I tried to see if you would remember the night that we met for the second time—even a little spark of recognition—but of course...”

Jongin laces his fingers into Kyungsoo’s and holds them together, sticky smudges of watermelon juice smearing over sweaty palms. “Here are the facts. I’m going to die. One day you’re going to forget us. And then, the day after that, you’re going to forget me. Not even because of your amnesia. Just because of time. Because that’s what time does. It takes the little pieces. The insignificant ones first, and then it sneaks the significant ones... But then by the time you do realize it, they’ll be gone, and you won’t know what’s missing until—”

“No, no Jongin, it’s not like that—my head is bad, but my heart,” Kyungsoo presses both their hands against his chest, and breathes in deeply, as if the air can fill the gap between them.

Jongin’s warmth seeps through his shirt and it makes his stomach light, unlocks the words from somewhere he had not known existed, “My heart is good. I’ll remember you there. I can’t remember anything about you, but when you hurt, my heart hurt. When you laugh, my heart laughs. I can love you even without memories so just hang on. Hang on, please?”

After a long struggle, Jongin manages to force a smile onto his face but it quivers, and ultimately cracks as he says, contemplatively, brutally, “This isn’t a romance novel, hyung. It doesn’t work that way.” He inhales, and the final nail comes not with a bang but a sorry whisper, “Don’t you see it, hyung? Our ending is so clear. It’s all been drafted from the very beginning, before we ever met.”

Though Jongin is waiting for a rebuttal, though they’re both waiting for a rebuttal, Kyungsoo doesn’t have anything to say. The sobs wrack through his body heavy and awful and he can’t

manage the slightest protest as Jongin rambles on, “You know—one day, I won’t be able to touch your face, talk to you. I’ll just—lay there, watching you cry with eyes wide open, body numb, and, and my hand, around yours... You’ll hold my hand like right now, but it’ll be cold, and it’ll hurt, more than it does now. And when that day comes, hyung, promise me you’ll let me go. You’ll go home, take away the daisies—”

“No.”

“Because, *listen*, hyung. You don’t deserve to...” Jongin’s Adam’s apple bobs up, stops, and doesn’t come down. His voice breaks. Kyungsoo suddenly realizes that Jongin’s been crying, too. He’s been crying all along, perhaps before Kyungsoo woke up, “see daisies wither...”

“No,” Kyungsoo grasps both of Jongin’s hands, collects all of the crumbling bones and the threadbare tendons, and gasps little prayers onto the feeble knuckles, “No, no, no.”

--

Between the months and the seconds, Kyungsoo loses track of the hour hand and forgets how to read clocks and calendars. Sometimes he forgets the date. Other times he looks out the window and wonders what season they’re in. His scrapbook is no longer updated and he’s not sure if he’s twenty or twenty-five because it doesn’t matter either way. He’s always going to be caught in the same spot, that’s just how things are.

But when Jongin comes in everything settles back together. It’s the last months of fall. 2013. He’s twenty-five, almost twenty-six three months, and so deeply in love that it hurts. It hurts because it’s already the last months of fall, because summer was over and he can’t even remember it, because he’s in the kind of love that makes him greedy and angry and sad for everything that he can’t have.

The kind of love that makes him cling onto Jongin at the end of every night and beg for him let him remember all of today, and yesterday, and—

“Tomorrow,” Jongin interrupts. Kyungsoo thinks that he smells a little of iodine or antiseptics, double-printed hospital sheets. “You can remember tomorrow. I’ll remember all of our yesterdays, and you can remember all of our tomorrows. It’ll be great.”

Kyungsoo deadpans, “That makes no sense. How do you even remember tomorrow?”

“Well,” Jongin relaxes into Kyungsoo’s arms, lets his back fill the curve of Kyungsoo’s chest and cheek glide over Kyungsoo’s, “Tomorrow I remember that we will go to the beach, and?”

“And what?”

“And what do you remember we’ll do?”

“Jongin what are you even saying, how do you remember something that’s never happened—”

“Shush. Let’s see. I remember that the water is going to be ablaze with light. The sun will be setting, all violet and red into the clouds. But it’ll be quiet, mostly just the sound of water and wind, and your voice. You’re going to sing My Lady and bury your feet in the sand while watching me kick around in the water. I’ll dance, you’ll sing. I’ll trip over, you’ll pluck your feet from the



sand and try to catch me. Noticing how nice you look, I'll get the sudden urge to put you in a compromising position. I'll make love to you right there and then so that there will be sand all over the place and you'll freak out, of course, and do the laundry four times, scrub everything down—but that's later, of course—first we'll have dinner sitting on the roof of the car, lazy and slow. We can have hamburgers, with lots of cheese..."

Kyungsoo contemplates, "And we'll watch the dusk. I'll keep singing and you'll grab my hand, drag me off the roof. We'll dance together. Laugh. You'll laugh harder but I'll laugh longer.

Mosquitoes everywhere, probably. I'd like to go but you want to stay longer, because you're like that, and I'll drag you back and you'll shrug me off but eventually you'll give, because I'll hit you. Or maybe I'll give, when you grab my hand and pull me in and kiss me really hard."

Jongin grabs his hand and pulls him in so close Kyungsoo can feel his exhales on his tongue, "Like this?"

"What are you thinking right now?"

"How much I want to stay like this."

There are questions Kyungsoo doesn't ask Jongin. He doesn't ask Jongin if they can stay together forever, or how many tomorrows are really left, because sometimes the truth is too bright. He can only hold onto the seconds, each gesture, each contact, each syllable. Jongin comes in seconds. Everything comes in seconds.

If only the seconds could last long enough.

--

When Kyungsoo wakes up the next day, however, they don't go to the beach. In fact, there is no 'they'. There are no yellow notes on his walls, no words on the last page of his scrapbook, no compromising positions or hamburgers over car roofs. There is only Kyungsoo rushing down the stairs for the factory, eating supper before an empty dining table, waiting for seven o'clock to come with eyes peeled on the neighboring balcony and a strange feeling that something might be amiss.

As he nurses a tune under the hazy stage lights, he stares at the empty seat on the other side of the bar and contemplates what that hollow pit in his chest means, why every note is coming off on the wrong key. Minseok tries to adjust his volume to cover for Kyungsoo's mistakes. He gives up by the time they hit the break, "What's up with you?"

"I don't know," Kyungsoo mutters. Nothing out of the ordinary has occurred today. Everything has gone according to the notes in his scrapbook.

"Where's that writer guy? Kim Jongin?"

"What writer guy?" is what Kyungsoo meant to ask, but it somehow comes out as a gasp of inexplicable panic and pain almost too loud to be registered. On instinct, he reaches for his scrapbook, goes through the pages once, and again, and again with the same shaking whimper, "I don't know any writer guys."

A bundle of dry-pressed daisies slip out from the back cover. Kyungsoo breaks. There's no one to catch him this time.

--

He wakes up in October to green on his walls, the color of synthetic grass that never dies. October withers the world at each sunset, until it reeks of decomposing leaves and forgotten promises. With October arrives endless rain that washes out immortal footprints and brings new customers into the bar.

He wakes up in November to snow piled thick and high outside his window. A familiar urge to bury his face in his pillow and cry like tomorrow will never come curdles in his guts. November carries days that vanish into thin air and nights that become the beginning to the end and the ending to the beginning. In November the tomorrows stop coming. In November he wonders how long he's lived like this, how much longer he's going to keep living like this, how many tomorrows there are left before time will let him go.

He wakes up in December, four days to Christmas, to a knocking at his door. Darkness swallows his apartment as he makes his way through the corridors, fingers outstretched to read the walls as he undoes the chains and pulls it open and—

“Hyung,” whimpers the boy at his door. What Kyungsoo takes in is a conflation of ashen lips and swollen eyes, shivering under a thin hospital gown with nothing save for snowflakes on his hair and plastic slippers under his feet. The boy might have been trying to smile, the traces of which are left tugging sadly at the corner of his mouth, but it all thaws away when he tries working his jaw again, “Hyung,” and it's a sob, “hyung, hyung...”

An enormous, inexplicably warm tide of relief washes over Kyungsoo, except it's not enough to stop him from croaking, hesitantly, “Who are you?”

A pause.

“Of course, of course you'd forget. How silly of me...”

Kyungsoo watches something well up the boy's already reddened eyes with breathless curiosity, or perhaps a prick of indefinable empathy. It's terrifying how easily this perfect construction of bones breaks down in slow motion. The boy gives in a tremble at a time, unwinding at the seams, into an eruption of noiseless wails. Forearms rubbing away tears and whole chest shaking with inconsolable grief, he eventually gulps everything down, hard.

He makes a little gesture of a wave, and it looks so fragile, “Sorry to disturb you. I just thought—in case you remembered—but, just, never mind. I'll just...”

There is nothing but the hush of colliding snowflakes, gleaming little spheres of light, like fireflies, as Kyungsoo wraps his hand around the boy's wrist. He isn't really thinking of fragility when he pulls the boy in closer to the door. In fact he isn't sure what he's thinking as he says, “No, it's snowing. Let me get you a jacket. You're going to catch a cold.”

“A cold,” the boy parrots, and his laugh sounds like the saddest thing this side of the universe,

"I'm going to catch a cold."

--

On their way to the hospital, the boy introduces himself as Jongin. He gives Kyungsoo four facts in the backseat of a taxi. One, he's a writer. Two, they've met before. Three, he's dying. Four, he's taken himself out of Kyungsoo's notes or scrapbook because of those facts.

"They said I had six months left. Maybe a year if I behaved," Jongin says, eyes reflections of the dawn flying past the windows, "So I wanted to play a hero. Let myself be forgotten, to save you from all the yesterdays and leave you with all the tomorrows but... then I heard that I had pneumonia. It wasn't six months. I had four weeks. Maybe three. And I cracked. Being stuck with the yesterdays while you moved on without me suddenly wasn't all that appealing anymore and—really, I'm sorry. I lied. I'm not a hero. Just a coward."

Their knees touch. Kyungsoo doesn't move away, "Do you... like me?"

"Like you," the boy echoes, and he's laughing again as he says, "No, I just want to be in all of your tomorrows. I want you to remember me."

Kyungsoo knows the truth, and he can tell that Jongin knows it too. Wishes are only wishes, and prayers are only prayers. The city flying past the windows might glow with Christmas and the warmth of New Years but it doesn't change the fact that too much is too much. Some things are simply not possible.

"I mean, you don't *have* to remember me. I'm not delusional. Really you can just drop me off at the hospital and... just... I just wanted to see you one more time, and I guess I did so... I'm really sorry for bothering you," Jongin laughs, and each time he laughs Kyungsoo thinks that it sounds more like a cry, "You must think I'm a freak or something, randomly popping up at your door like this."

"I don't think you're a freak," Kyungsoo interrupts, and the tension fades a little when he manages a grin, "I think you're a moron, for running out of the hospital in this kind of getup when it's snowing outside."

The car stops. It takes a few moments before either of them realizes that they're already at the entrance, and that the time has come for Kyungsoo to leave and Jongin to stay. For their last second, they're all polite smiles and awkward bowing of the heads, as if they've only just met for the first time and that Jongin's red eyes mean nothing.

"So," Jongin says, not quite shivering with Kyungsoo's jacket over his shoulders, but still chattering nonetheless, "I just, I have one last request?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you say my name? One last time."

Kyungsoo clears his throat and tries to replicate the syllables, but somehow they're stuck to the sides of his throat even as he opens his mouth. Nothing comes out. By the time he reaches up to touch his neck, he realizes he's shaking and that there is something wrong with him. The world is

coming down on him in slow motion and his heart hurts really, very bad.

“Jong...” Kyungsoo gulps down the hesitation and focuses on the bare syllables, “Jongin.”

“Thank you. Thank you,” And the second thank you is said softly, almost as if it’s meant for more significant things. Perhaps something of a, “Thank you for meeting me, finding me, digging me up from the debris of broken pieces. Thank you for giving me life, tears, wishes, rows and rows of yellow sticky notes lighting up my room when the tapestries have shut off the sun. Thank you for teaching me how bright fireflies can shine.”

But Kyungsoo doesn’t hear any of that. All he hears is Seoul at dawn, the whistles of a breeze and Jongin wheezing for oxygen.

“You’re welcome,” he returns stiffly. It’s a cold today. Jongin doesn’t shiver as he crawls out the car, slams the door, and looks back.

Rolling down the window, Kyungsoo wonders why it feels like his whole world is collapsing. Outside, with the wind sharpening his bones and coursing through his hair, Jongin smiles meekly. Kyungsoo nods. A few shreds of snow make it down from the sky, and disappear.

“Well.”

“Okay.”

They’ve given up words, because there is a mutual understanding that words are clumsy. Words are like little comets, streaking behind them a reign of tears and hesitation. They can’t afford words. No tears or comets or hesitation in this exchange between a stranger and a memory, only glimmers of snow. Kyungsoo extends his hand awkwardly across the window pane. Jongin takes it, laughing at something funny that Kyungsoo can’t understand, and then he turns around and walks. Legs too thin, back too bent, head held too pitifully high despite his trembling fingers.

Kyungsoo turns to the driver with a grin two shades too bright, “Drive me back, please.”

He’s trying to pretend that it’s all natural, because it is. After all, he doesn’t know this Jongin. He doesn’t understand the meaning of tomorrows or yesterdays and on top of that, he’s already late for work. With a deep inhale of crisp winter, Kyungsoo tells himself that he doesn’t want to run at all, that there are no tears threatening to fall, no tears blurring his vision even though—

They fall, anyway, one by one, as does Jongin. Kyungsoo screams so loud he doesn’t recognize his own voice.

--

Standing at the back of the room, Kyungsoo gathers leftover words from the doctors. Something somethings about oxygen treatments not being enough, antibiotics but the liver is shutting down, keep him in the ICU maybe but it’s not like it’ll change anything, at least down the fever in an ice bath but his lungs won’t hold up. He doesn’t understand any of the big words, the multi-syllable Symbicort or Theophylline or corticosteroids, but he understands the ticking of the second hand in between the lines, the incessant beeping of the monitors, the meaningless apologies about, “there’s nothing more we can do.”

"I don't want to die," Jongin says, muffled under the oxygen mask. Kyungsoo settles in the stool beside his bed and studies the plastic veins extending out of Jongin's ankles. Somehow he looks so tiny, so full of emaciated edges.

"You're not going to die. They said you'll be fine."

"Liar," Jongin laughs, shifting his head away, and that's when Kyungsoo realizes that he's not really laughing. That he's crying. "There's going to be a new guy in this bed in three weeks. Four, tops. I've got pneumonia. On top of the fibrosis I have fucking *pneumonia*."

"You're going to be fine," Kyungsoo insists, even though Jongin is wrong about the three weeks, because it's really something more like two. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"No," Jongin screws his eyes shut. Kyungsoo doesn't know what else to do but stand up and drag his fingers over Jongin's chest.

Jongin quickly flinches away, "Now what?"

"Writing god a note. I have to. He can't take away these lungs. You need them," Kyungsoo decides, pulling Jongin closer to continue scribbling invisible lines into Jongin's flesh, "You really need them."

The silence falls, and after it falls it never lifts again. Jongin's murmur is just a ghost behind the hum of the air conditioner.

"When I first heard I was going to die, I thought—finally, thank you—but now, now I just—I just want one more minute, one more millisecond—I want more time, with you, hyung... I haven't loved you yet, I'm not *done*..." and his eyes close before Kyungsoo has a chance to grab his hand and tell him that they have enough time. That there's no rush, that it'll be fine, because he's going to go home and write all of this down—*Kim Jongin, west wing, room two-twenty, Seoul Hospital, take the taxi to the southern entrance, we're not finished yet*—so that he can come back tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after...

--

"Mm, we can try tattooing my name... onto your face," Jongin says, taking a long drag of oxygen from his mouthpiece. The nurse had let him into a wheelchair earlier, said he was doing much better and should get out of his room. Try walking down the hallways, she said. And so here they are, two little figures wrapped up in big bundles of wool and cashmere, bracing the stale air down endless corridors. The steady tap of Kyungsoo's heel is comforting, almost, a testament to the reality of their existence: they're still together, the two of them; they're making it through one more day.

"I can't see my own face though."

"Well it can't go on mine. I'd look... awful with my own name on my... face," Jongin chuckles, sputtering for air and waving away Kyungsoo's concerned hand, "I mean the press already thinks... I'm a narcissist. Just imagine... them finding out about a fucking... tattoo—ha."

They say nothing, merely watching the other patients pass. It's a welcomed kind of peace that

they're no longer afraid of, though eventually Jongin breaks it again, "Are you going to... the bar tonight?"

Kyungsoo shrugs, "Maybe not tonight."

"You said... the same thing... yesterday," Jongin grins, eyes a little melancholy under the occasional moan of the oxygen tank, "Tomorrow, go to the bar. You... have to sing. It's what... you do. Sing. Live life."

"I'm living it with you," Kyungsoo protests, "I can sing right now."

"No don't make an idiot out of—"

But Kyungsoo sings, melodies frosting delicate and translucent despite the suffocating atmosphere, breaking the Jongin's scowl one scoff at a time. Hesitantly, Jongin's fingers begin tapping on the arm of the wheelchair.

It doesn't take long for him to realize that Jongin isn't just nursing a beat, that his fingers are dancing some kind of magic into the cold. And as Kyungsoo kneels before him, coming head to head and eye in eye, everything perfectly in sync, Jongin's fingertips skitter up his knuckles. Light and easy. "Arabresque," he whispers, words surfacing as white mists over the plastic. His hand does a little leap. "Grand jeté," and a twirl of the wrist, spinning nails digging laughter out of Kyungsoo's palm, "fouetté en tourant," to the edge of his palm and over to the back, "here a sissonne, one, and a two, and—," they both stop breathing momentarily, when his fingers cross Kyungsoo's wrist and up his forearm, arm, shoulder, collarbone, neck, lower lip, stop.

They share a smile, during which Kyungsoo presses his lips against Jongin's fingers, molding easily over the cold, pruning flesh. Jongin's flush is almost too bright against the white backdrop of his hospital gown. Kyungsoo thinks that he could be glowing, perhaps a little like a firebug. With time their song ends, and the nurse calls Jongin back into his room because the unfiltered air isn't kind to his lungs. Nothing is kind to his lungs.

"Night hyung," Jongin breathes, as they hook him to his daily dose of morphine. His eyes are beginning to flutter closed, and Kyungsoo knows that he's grasping at the seconds when he says, "I love you."

"No, Jongin. Tell me that you'll see me tomorrow."

"Hyung I might not make..."

"*Just*. Tell. Me. That you," and Kyungsoo's voice falters all too suddenly, words and thoughts collapsing at once. He remembers the way Jongin's fingers had danced so adeptly up his arm, so naturally, as if they were born for the single purpose only minutes earlier, and it all feels so surreal to this Jongin lying etherized under blankets of fluorescent lighting, this Jongin who will probably never dance again. "...tomorrow. Tomorrow..."

Jongin puts his hand on Kyungsoo's neck, draws him a little closer, smudging Kyungsoo's tears with a thumb, "Okay. See you..."

The trickles of fluid dripping into his plastic veins take him away before the last word.

--

There are no more yesterdays, and gradually no more todays either, just tomorrows. They're running out of time. The shadows are becoming too long, the lights blinking too slow, the monitor's song always on the verge of a fugue. Giggles always erupt from under Jongin's frown, swelling slowly into raucous laughter. Too loud. Too rushed. He's laughing as if he's afraid he won't get a chance to laugh again. As if he's afraid all the lights will turn off if he doesn't keep up his display. So Kyungsoo wraps his arm around Jongin's waist, when no one is watching, and presses their foreheads together. He tells Jongin that it's okay. That he doesn't have to laugh so hard. That he understands, whatever it is.

"I'm on borrowed time... How much do you think the interest is?" Jongin muses one day, contemplating the thought as the nurse slides a giant metal tube into his back. He takes a long drag of oxygen and holds it while blood and puss pours into a plastic container.

"I don't know," Kyungsoo answers quietly.

"At the last moments you begin... praying for things... will I make it for the winter... can we make kimchi together..."

"Do you want kimchi?"

"And then you want more... Will I make it... to kiss you under the mistletoe. And... will I make it... for New Years, because I want, I want to eat... rice cakes, with you. Will you... make it for our birthday... I want to see... the mole on your tragus... when I lean, in, to... whisper in your ear... show you... true fire... flies..."

"Stop it, Jongin, you'll make it to all of them. We've already made it for the mistletoe, today," Kyungsoo insists, pointing to the neon-wrapped boxes at the other end of the room, "We have Christmas. If we've gone through Christmas we can do New Years, too, and our birthdays, and I can show you my mole right now if you—"

"And it's never enough, because... the more I have of... you the more I... realize that I'm still missing... so much of you... of us..."

"We can celebrate it together," Kyungsoo interrupts, "We'll celebrate everything together, okay? Okay? Just, don't cry, Jongin—"

"You're the one... crying, hyung."

"Shut up."

"I don't want to die yet, hyung," Jongin chuckles drily, droplets of liquid rolling down the creases of his eyes. Kyungsoo isn't sure if they're the tears that have fallen onto him, or the tears that are falling out of him.

--

He can't talk anymore, the head-nurse explains in hushed whispers, as if it were some terrible secret, his lungs don't supply enough oxygen as it is and it's best not to agitate him. But to Kyungsoo it doesn't really matter, because he doesn't need to hear Jongin speak. He doesn't

need to touch Jongin, either, or to see him. He just needs to be near him. To know that Jongin is breathing, still, that Jongin can hear him when he sings for him, that his lips can twitch a little with every lame joke Kyungsoo throws at him.

Kyungsoo doesn't really understand how he knows this guy, or why his knees automatically buck when he sees the stranger's room number. Then again, he doesn't understand a lot of things. And by the number of questions Jongin passes him, scratched out sloppily over little yellow sticky notes, neither does Jongin.

*"One day you'll look to the balcony next to yours and you won't see an asshole draining cigarettes. During those days will you be sad?"*

Kyungsoo looks up from the note, blinking reluctantly, "I'm already sad. I miss seeing you on that balcony," and he doesn't fail to recognize the shock registering on Jongin's expression.

*"How did you know that it was me?"* Jongin writes, so quickly that the handwriting is illegible but Kyungsoo knows what he's asking, because he's asking the same question himself.

"It was just a feeling," Kyungsoo grins, and he's so glad that he's finally caught something in memory. Maybe they've got hope after all. Maybe tomorrow Jongin will get his lungs and Kyungsoo his memory, and the day after that they can talk about what they did tomorrow. About silly notes, trembling hands, glassy eyes.

Tonight he goes home with Jongin's name on his lips. Repeating it like a prayer, again and again and again until it's as natural as breathing, he carries it into his dream, begs a million times for god to please at least let him keep the name. Please at least let him have Jongin, let him struggle out of those dreams without taking Jongin away. He doesn't need to know anything, not of their past or their future or their virtues and vices. All he wants is just a name. Any little piece of Kim Jongin.

--

When Kyungsoo wakes up he finds a whole assortment of crumpled sticky notes in his pockets, littered in barely legible scribbles of pen and pencil. They're written by a practiced, albeit shaken hand, with lines spiraling and barely hanging on. He smooths the first note over his palm, carefully smothering away the wrinkles.

*"Do you think there is a god?"*

*"If there's a god, do you think he'd give me some extra time? It doesn't have to be a lot. Just an extra week, or even day. Anything. I wouldn't mind an hour. A second. I want more time. I just want more time."*

*"You're crying."*

*"I should've stopped smoking earlier, huh?"*

*"Stop being so brave, hyung."*

The last note is green and, with edges fraying, corners dog-eared and yellowing, clearly older than the other two. The handwriting is more determined, pressed down with so much force that



the words are physically imprinted into the paper. However, it's still distinct enough for him to recognize: *"My name is Jongin. I'm the writer who lives next door. See you tomorrow, hyung. Don't forget!"*

--

Sometimes when Kyungsoo looks at Jongin in the hospital bed, he's not sure if he's looking at a reflection or the original. It's almost as if time has worn away him from the outside, turned him transparent, left just enough of him to be a shadow. Kyungsoo wants to talk to him, but the nurse says that it's unlikely that Jongin can manage, so he can only look down at the "Jongin" scribbled loosely on the back of his hand, and match it to the "Kim Jongin" nameplate hanging at the end of the bed.

The seconds refract into kaleidoscope souls over the bedsheets, and Kyungsoo counts them one by one as Jongin drags his body around. Feeble, whistling moans inflate the hush between them as he lifts an arm, which Kyungsoo immediately clasps with both hands.

Jongin's first murmurs are nearly indistinguishable from the gush of air rushing out of his plastic mask, and he repeats himself with painstaking determination until Kyungsoo makes out, "Will you be here tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"Be here tomorrow, the thirteenth," the boy says, negotiating for each syllable with deep inhaled air, "Our birthday... tomorr... average... twelfth... fourteenth...thirteen..."

Kyungsoo balks. Jongin winks. Everything ends too easily, but they hold it together with a thin string of hope. Kyungsoo doesn't go home tonight. He begs for the nurses to let him stay overnight and by some miracle they relent, though they tell him to keep quiet, because Jongin needs his rest. Because Jongin is really hanging onto life by nothing by that thin string of hope. He tries to stay up all night, to be able to look Jongin in the eye tomorrow morning and be the first to tell him, "Happy birthday, to Kim Jongin and Do Kyungsoo," without looking at any notes. Tomorrow he needs to save Jongin. He has to save him. Remember him.

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Sunlight drifts into Kyungsoo's dream, refracts into something cool and salty and maybe involving heels digging into the soft overlap between ocean and beach. He turns and the wet sand transforms into cold linens.

When he opens his eyes the cocktail of seagull wings and shades of blue is replaced by a frail green line jumping through a black screen, a small window at the end of a narrow hospital room, and plastic floor tiles. Plastic everything. It's not his room, and he has no idea how he could have woken up by a stranger's bedside. There are words written on the back of his hand, a loose, fading *"remember Jongin; our birthday tomorrow (13th January 2014)."*

Kyungsoo drags himself upright, back cracking and neck sore from slumping over the bed all night, and that is when he notices that the stranger on the bed has been watching him, a twinkle

of a smile lingering over his indistinct features.

“Hello?” Kyungsoo blinks. The stranger doesn’t respond, though maybe the corner of his eye flinches. Maybe his thumb twitches. Kyungsoo looks at the nameplate on the end of the bed. Kim Jongin.

There is an unsettlingly even stream of air gushing in and out of a bizarre metal apparatus by the bedside. Kyungsoo traces his gaze over the plastic extending out of it and into Kim Jongin’s nose. He’s about to ask a question, probably about the strange message on his hand, when something strikes him and he blurts a, “Happy birthday, to us.”

The stranger named Kim Jongin seems to take an extra sharp gasp of air. His hand twitches in Kyungsoo’s grasp, and gradually, he falls back asleep.

Kyungsoo almost begins thinking that it’s natural, that the stranger is probably just tired, but the constant beeping from the monitor with green lines stops, and some kind of alarm goes off loud and noisy and a slew of doctors and nurses rushes inside and shoulder him away, too far away, as they try to wake the stranger back up. And he realizes that this is wrong. All of this is wrong.

Wrong

“Kim Jongin, time of death nine twenty-seven, January thirteenth, year two-thousand and fourteen. Monday.” *Wrong.*

It’s not until Kyungsoo has made it out of the hospital that the tears slam him in the face, knocks him off guard and shatters his whole body into a thousand irreversible pieces. He has no idea why the world seems to have ended on such a beautiful January day, or why he’s sobbing in the middle of the street as if tomorrow will never come. Why the name on the back of his hand burns harder than any goodbye.

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It’s early Friday morning, second week of July, an hour when the world runs on uncertain lamplights, drunken howls, and the occasional punch of laughter. There are just the two of them in the elevator at this hour.

Having just returned from the bar, Kyungsoo tries to fight off the cocktail of metallic smoke and the thick scent of alcohol caught in his hair. The last ringlets of saxophone nestle over his fingers and cinquillo beat lingers under his skin, but none of it is really enough to distract him. But today he feels awfully empty, like someone has taken him apart while he was sleeping, stolen something from his core, and put the rest of him back together again.

The stranger, with an unlit cigarette between his teeth, turns first. The unflattering elevator lighting makes him look tired, and thin, and generally awful. Kyungsoo wonders, with the cinquillo pounding into his veins, if the man’s skin is as plastic as it seems.

“Are you Do Kyungsoo?” The stranger asks, turning around just in time for the elevator to slide open.

“Yes,” Kyungsoo responds, hesitantly stepping out with the other after him, “Have we met

before?”

“No, not really,” the stranger smiles, extending a hand, “I’m Oh Sehun. I was Kim Jongin’s editor?”

Something in Kyungsoo stirs, but not enough. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m kind of busy, so I’m just going to cut this short,” Sehun says, dislodging something bulky from his briefcase and handing it to Kyungsoo. It’s a notebook, Kyungsoo realizes, an old one weathered and dog-eared from use, smeared all over with runny ink and graphite, “This is Jongin’s last novel. Hand-written and everything. For you.”

Eventually Sehun disappears down the corridors and Kyungsoo finds himself sitting on the balcony, moonlight grazing the notebook in his lap. He flips to the last page on a whim, just to check if it’s a sad ending, because he doesn’t like sad endings.

*“My name is Jongin. I’m the writer who lives next door. See you tomorrow, hyung. Don’t forget!”*