**Dynamics**

**2:00pm. Monday.**

The older man sitting across from her repeats "bus, bus, bus," like a mantra. Maybe he’s just trying to remember something, the fact that he is on a bus or what a bus even is. He has on an orange jacket and black gym shoes lined with red trim. His hair is white, and his face is weathered. His aura is confused. Everything about him seems sad, at least Melanie thinks so.

  The bus slowly moves along. It passes her former work place, and even a former lover who walks down the street almost carelessly. It looks like he’s looking for something or someone. Her?

“Mel!” he shouted from across the street and called her to attention, wagging his index finger to beckon her. The image makes the hair on her arms stand on end, like little soldiers with perfect posture. The memory of his voice and touch cause her to vomit in her mouth, but she chokes it back down without a second thought. She wished she had broken his finger in that moment.

It’s been a few years since, but they had encountered each other many times along that same path, but she purposely avoids it now. He’s wearing a brown leather jacket and black jeans. His face is just as stupid as she remembers. She turns her head to watch his exiguous frame disappearing behind the bus. He is nothing but a stranger now, and she can't decide if she still hates him. Hate is a strong feeling, and any feeling would mean that she still cared, so she decides she doesn't hate him any longer. *What would be the point?* Hate would be such a wasted emotion on a stranger, better not to care at all.  
  
      The bus continues, stopping at one point to make a driver exchange. One shift ends and another begins. This reminds her that she's cutting it close, and she hopes she'll make it to work on time. The bus turns on to Western. She checks a bus tracking app to make sure the second bus she needs to take is on time. One minute away it says, she'll get to work on time, no doubt about it. She gets off the bus at Western and Lawrence, then hops on to the next bus soon after.  
     
    Mel sees a man sitting across from her with sun soaked skin, fake diamond earrings, and a close to the scalp haircut. She watches him crumple a few dollars and shove them in his pocket with his left hand. He keeps it there, clutching the money as if his life depends on it, at least it appears that way. With his right hand, he wipes his eyes, and when his hand goes back to resting on his lap, it glistens as if wet. *He's crying?* She wonders if she should ask what's wrong, but doesn't. She watches him with growing interest. He's wearing black Nike shoes, the type meant for skateboarding, with untied laces that drag along the floor, the white trim caked in dirt, blue jeans and a long-sleeved shirt from Hollister. He's older, too old for those clothing brands, and probably half way to death's door. He's got dried blood caked behind his left ear.  
​  
    The bus slowly creeps up a bridge, and stops constantly due to construction. They say Chicago has only two seasons: Winter and Construction. She only has thirty minutes left before she'll be late to work. The weather is mild, no chilling wind that slices the skin or baking sun that ages it, only a cool breeze and streaked clouds that blend in with the light blue sky.

The man twitches. He opens a bottle and downs something. It's alcohol. He's drunk. The bottle is almost empty and he spills most of the remaining contents on himself. He yawns, unconcerned with the mess he's made. Drunk before three in the afternoon. She tries not to judge him. She wonders why he's doing this, and if he does it often. She checks the clock on her phone, twenty minutes till she’s late for work. He sits with his hands on his lap, fingers interlocked.  
  
     The bus passes her friend Lilah’s house on Belden, and she wonders what she could be doing at this very moment. *Probably sleeping.* She has an awful sleep schedule.

More people board the bus. The drunk man stands up, prepared to get off. The back of his shirt is wet; *how did he do that?* He gets off by the Western blue line. She wonders if he's got more bottles in his plain black backpack and if he'll continue drinking on the train. She checks the time. Sixteen minutes until she's late.  
  
​     A woman, who boarded only a few stops before, stands nearby talking to herself. She recounts a story about a past job.

"They turned against me because of one lie," the woman says, but it's out of context and Mel's not sure what she’s going on about. She pulls the cord to indicate her stop is coming up.

"All you want to do is hurt me," the woman goes on. *Who is she talking to?* She gets louder.

"Sweetheart, I'm going to have to ask you to sit down," calls the bus driver from the front. He's got brown skin, a kind face, and a massive frame. She gets even louder, ignoring him, and probably not even realizing that she is being instructed to quiet down.

"I felt cold. There was no love in his heart,” the woman says.

Mel wonders what this woman has been through, and thinks about asking, but doesn't. The bus stops across from her workplace. She hops off after thanking the driver, and leaves the woman and the live drama of public transportation behind for a few hours.

**7:30pm. Tuesday.**

Melanie is sprawled on the loveseat, comfortable, but a bit cold. She’s wrapped herself in a red blanket, and leaves no room for Theo to sit beside her. She feels no remorse.

“How was your day, pretty girl?” asks Theo, plopping down to the floor beside the loveseat. He rests his right arm on her red wrapped legs, and looks up at her. He doesn’t mind being on the floor because it reminds him of building blanket forts and camping in the living room with his father all those years ago. They never did make it to the great outdoors. He always wonders what it would have been like to sleep beneath the burning stars.

“It was okay. Long. Glad it’s finally over,” she sighs, staring up at the ceiling, half wishing that a large object would crash through the ceiling to kill her right then, just like in the movies.

“Just okay?” he asks, eyes following the color filled images dancing across the television screen. Asking about her day was more about routine now than actual interest, sort of like muscle memory.

“I had to wipe ass again today. They’re supposed to be toilet trained before they’re enrolled. I never agreed to this,” she says, more annoyed by the inconvenience than disgusted by having to deal with human excrements.

“Then say no,” he says, eyes occupied.

“I can’t just refuse to do it. I’m the only adult around, I can’t just let them walk around like that all day.”

“Hmm… well that sucks. Why don’t you complain to the parents and-”

“The kids are driving me crazy with their indecisiveness,” she cuts Theo off. “Why can't they just do one god damn activity for longer than five minutes? We always switch from painting to having a tea party to singing with Elsa and Anna all in a matter of minutes. It's sickening.”

“Mel, they're only three. Give them a chance.”

“I know… I know you're right, but I can't stand it. I run out of ideas sometimes and just end up streaming a few episodes of a show of their choosing off Netflix.”

“You’re already corrupting their little minds with My Little Pony, aren’t you?”

“Of course not! I can’t risk their becoming Bronies. Speaking of which, I saw that Brony guy on the bus again today! He’s finally losing weight and he even stopped using that MLP satchel, but he switched to Aéropostale and that’s not much of an upgrade either. Baby steps I suppose.”

“Losing weight? I’m so proud him.” He hopes his tone indicates his genuine interest.

“Me too! Maybe next time I’ll see him with a girlfriend or boyfriend.”

“I wish him all the best,” says Theo, and he means it.

“Besides sparing them from the ponies, I’m not sure what I’m doing there. I can’t stand kids for too long, and I feel like I’m not making an impact in these kids’ lives at all,” says Mel. She feels disappointed. Disappointed with herself, her job, and her life up to this point.

“Then what's the point in working there?” he asks. He allows himself to wonder if they’ll ever have kids of their own. He’d like to someday, but he knows she isn’t as open to the idea.

“It’s pretty easy at the end of the day. Oh, and the money, of course.”

“When did you start caring about money?”

“When college ended, leaving me broke and in debt. You know this already! I feel like you don’t really listen to me like you used to.” She says this with a tone she knows doesn’t match her true feelings, and she’s glad.

“You’re crazy,” he laughs. He wonders if that’s how she truly feels. He makes a mental note to think about it again later. *Is longevity causing our communication to deteriorate?* He hopes not.

“Are you trying to gas-light me right now?” She says, hoping her tone sounds serious. He turns his head to look up at her. She’s repressing a smile. He knows she wants to laugh, and keeps looking at her until she can’t hold it in any longer.

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“Have you ever thought of doing something else? Like, if you could do anything, be anything, what would you do?” she asks, surprised that she’s never asked him before, or maybe she just doesn’t remember his past answer.

He looks up at her from his spot on the floor, and mulls this question over a bit. “I’d like to be the guy that writes directions on things,” he says. He’s thought about this before, and he’s not sure why he hasn’t mentioned it, or if he has, can’t remember.

She looks at him and starts to laugh, but he remains silent. She notices this and her eyebrows knit together in seriousness. “Really?” she asks, looking down at her hands, feeling awful.

“Yeah.”

“How did you come up with that?”

“Well one day I was taking a shower, and when I picked up the bottle of body wash, I realized that there were directions on the back. Simple stuff like ‘pour onto wash cloth or hand’ and it got me thinking, someone must come up with this stuff. I mean who doesn’t know how to use body wash, right? But that’s the thing, everything, all products have directions. Maybe not just for stupid people, but so companies don’t get sued if someone uses something the wrong way. It’s sort of like that lady who sued McDonald’s over hot coffee.”

“Her cause was justified though! Do you know how hot their coffee was? They were serving it at temperatures so hot that it caused third degree burns. The poor old lady spilled it in her crotch, I can’t even imagine that kind of pain.” She looks down at him, seeing the genuine interest in his eyes.

“Yeah, I know, but come on! Who is stupid enough to spill hot coffee on themselves like that? The cup didn’t say the stuff was hot, and she sued them for millions!”

“That’s not true, she got less than a million. Accidents happen. I read that she didn’t even want to sue, but McDonald’s refused to, at least, pay for her medical expenses, and she didn’t have much of a choice after that. I’d do the same thing if I were in her shoes. How else could we afford pricy medical bills like that?”

“Yeah, I guess she didn’t have a choice. Well, anyway, I’d want to be the guy that makes sure this kind of stuff doesn’t happen.”

“You’d prevent little old ladies from paying their medical bills?”

“I’d be the guy preventing little old ladies from putting hot cups of coffee between their legs in the first place,” he says.

“Interesting field of choice. Why?” she asks.

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it much.”

“Don’t say that. You’ve obviously thought about it a lot. I think it’s brilliant. I’m jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Yeah. I’ve never given anything that much thought,” she lies.

“Really?” He knows that can’t be true. *You’re always overthinking.*

“Yeah. I’ve never thought about it, but it makes sense. I think it’s great that you put so much thought into it… But what about your bass playing? I figured your answer would be something along the lines of ‘rock star’ or ‘body builder’ or ‘body building rock star’.”

“Babe, I’ve always said the band is just my hobby.” He shakes his head and rolls his eyes in an exaggerated manner so she will notice his annoyance.

“And yet here we are, in the same two or three dive bars every few weeks so your band can collectively make twenty dollars,” she says. She’s isn’t sure why she’s being mean, but she can feel it. She knows her words are dripping with resentment, and hopes he hasn’t noticed.

“Exactly why I don’t want to be a rock star… who needs money and fame? I’m only in it for the drink tickets,” he says. It’s half true. He just doesn’t know who he’d be without music, and so he can’t just give it up. *A hobby is better than nothing*, he thinks.

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"We need to be more like Arnold," says Theo.

“What are you going on about now?” asks Mel, engrossed in the moving images in front of them.

“His drive. His commitment…” he trails off.

“Are you indirectly telling me I need to lose weight?”

“Of course not! You’re fine the way you are, babe,” he says.

“It’s the donuts, isn’t it? You know I love seasonal flavors, it’s my weakness!” she laughs.

“This isn’t about losing weight! I just mean…When you find that passion, that thing that makes you tick, that thing that drives you... You’d do anything and everything to get it.”

“Is this about our discussion earlier because-” she starts to say.

“He dreamt of being Mr. Olympia as a kid,” he interrupts. “That was his one major goal in life. He wanted it and strived for it, went to the gym twice a day every day for years. He won not only once, but seven times. Then he wanted to be an actor, and now he's a household name,” he says. He’s not completely sure why he’s going on about and on about Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“Interesting, but-” she gets in before he cuts her off again.

“He wanted it all as a young kid living in Austria, and that's exactly what he did. Crazy inspirational."

"Well we can't all be young Austrian boys turned Mr. Olympia, but I think I get what you're saying… And then he fucked up with that secret child... but hey, we're all human in the end," she says.

"That's the least of our worries, babe. Just look at the positive stuff," he laughs.

"You don't have any secret kids I need to worry about, right?"

"Not as far as I know," he says smiling up at her.

"You sound as sure as you do when you say the Bears are doing well this year. They've been terrible for a long time... you just have to accept that."

“They haven't been terrible that long! They could’ve won a lot more games last year, most losses came within a score. This year there are lots of beatable teams, but lots of small errors keep adding up. Year before was shitty, I'll admit. That's why we fired the coach and manager and replaced them. Year before that though, they showed promise and could have made it to the playoffs as well."

“American football... I can't. You're killing me."

“That’s because you think soccer is the only real sport.”

“Don’t even start, you know it is!”

“No more sports talk then," he laughs.

“Good.”

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“Have you ever thought about doing some meditation? I mean it. You've got so much stuff going on in your head.” He’s got quite a bit swirling around in his own head too, but he wants to keep the focus on her.

“Here we go with the gas-lighting again. You do know that’s a sign! Is this becoming an emotionally abusive relationship? If this continues I’ll need years of therapy,” she says.

“Consider meditation. I promise, it'll help you.”

“Since when are you into meditation?” She’s genuinely curious. How can there still be things that they don’t know about each other. She figured they already knew everything, but at least this keeps it interesting.

“I don't do it much, but the one time I really focused and tried it, it worked amazingly.”

“What’s your technique then?” she asks, hoping to sound playful.

“Some deep breaths. In and out. Eyes closed. Just feeling relaxed. Feeling the weight of the air on your body. Continuing with the deep breaths. Then imagine as if an eraser is slowly erasing your body away. Feeling the lightness of the air.”

“That's fucking scary.”

“It's not supposed to be. It's supposed to help you get more in tune with the world around you, to feel like you’re a part of the environment rather than an object in a room.”

“Why would I want to imagine erasing myself? That’s just fucking terrifying. You know I hate anything existential. Do you want me to have a panic attack?”

“A panic attack caused by meditation… you’re so weird. You know that, right?” He can’t suppress his smile.

“Isn’t that why you love me?”

“No.”

**9pm. Friday.**

Melanie steps up to her door, slides the key into the doorknob and turns it. The door gives way, and she walks into an empty apartment. Theo must still be at work, she thinks. She closes the door and locks the top lock, drops her backpack onto the floor, and shimmies out of her large gray sweater, tossing it on the back of a chair. She takes off her light blue gym shoes one at a time, using first her right foot to slide it off her left heel, and vice versa with the next.

It takes her a moment to process her thoughts, but once she's made up her mind, she abandons her strewn articles and heads for the kitchen. Her eyes lock on to the farthest light brown cabinet door to her right, and she practically dances over to it, which she finds strange, but then decides not question her actions too much. She opens the cabinet door, and finds the middle shelf bare. *Where are they?* She wonders. She closes the cabinet and opens it once more, hoping that her favorite chips will suddenly appear before her. No luck. Melanie feels her face contort in a mixture of disappointment and utter annoyance.

"Did he eat my chips?" She says to herself. She turns to the trash bin on her left, staring at it for a moment before deciding to open the lid with the push of a button. She hates the fancy trash bin, but Theo insisted. He also ate her fucking chips, which she discovers when the lid opens and reveals a crumpled, empty potato chip bag. She stares at it, feeling betrayed and ridiculous for feeling this way. She curses him under her breath.

In the distance, she hears the rattling of keys and the front door being opened. He's home. *Should I forget about this? They're just chips... but I wanted them. Now I'll have to go to the store... but I just got home. He always does this. Make him feel bad! But I'm sure he had a long day too... fuck that, he ate your chips, Mel!*

“Mel? Are you home?” Theo calls out from the living room.

“Yeah. Kitchen.”

“Hey, you,” Theo says when he walks into the kitchen. He’s already taken off his tie, and his hair is a mess, no doubt from the wind outside. She stares at him, thinking about what to say.

“Hey.” She watches his lips turn down. He can feel that something is off, and she knows it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Mel,” he says, stretching out the M, so that it sounds like ‘Mmmmel’.

“You ate them,” she says. *Just let it go. Just let it go.*

“Ate them?”

“My chips…” she says, barely a whisper. She knows she’s being silly.

“Babe...” He starts to say, but she interrupts him.

“You always do this, Theo!” she yells, “You have no consideration for others, do you? I come home, and all I want is to relax and have some fucking chips! Is that too much to ask for? Am I crazy for wanting something so simple? Why do you do this! You’re such an asshole!”

He stares at her; she knows how she looks right now. *Crazy.* She looks down at her socks, festive, silly, stupid.

The kitchen remains silent for a moment, but then Theo’s laughter echoes through their small apartment. Her head snaps up so she can glare at him, but this doesn’t last. Melanie notices a black plastic bag in Theo’s left hand. He lifts the bag, and hands it to her, laughing continuously throughout the exchange. She takes it and stares down at the contents. He stops laughing. In the bag, there is a bottle of Tito’s and a large bag of chips.

“I came home a half hour ago. I was so hungry that I made a sandwich and devoured your chips. I felt bad, so I went to the Liquor store up the street to get more, and grabbed some vodka too. Figured we could stay in and get drunk tonight.”

*Oh God… You over reacted again. Fuck. He’s so kind… what is wrong with you? Just apologize…*

“I’m…” she starts to say, and then the tears start. *Unnecessary. What the hell are you doing?* She thinks.

“Don’t cry, silly girl,” Theo says as he wraps her in a hug, the standard liquor store bag still in her arms. “I forgive you for calling me an asshole… but I guess this means that you’re the asshole now.”

She can’t help but laugh through the tears. *Damn him.*

“Let’s get drunk,” he says.

“Okay.”

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Melanie and Theo are seated on their loveseat, a couch fit for only a pair. The TV is on, set to a random program about Alaskan survival, volume low. They’ve pulled the coffee table closer to them. On it, an open bag of chips, a half empty bottle of Tito’s, and a half dozen flattened Capri suns of the fruit punch variety.

“Is the Federal Reserve a private bank or a public bank?” asks Theo.

“Public,” she says.

“Wrong.”

“What? Isn’t it run by the government?”

“Nope. It’s a private bank, and they make suggestions to the government about what interest rates should be,” he says.

“That’s crazy, I never knew that. The name alone…”

“That’s exactly it. It’s like that group of Christians that parade around claiming that they’re protecting the sanctity of marriage and ‘the family,’ under a name that completely misleads people into to thinking that they’re just harmless.”

“Damn. That’s messed up. How can the government be taking advice from a private bank?”

“England, Babe,” he says.

“England? You mean the Rothschild’s?”

“Yeah.” Theo takes a shot.

“Those 1% assholes that Bernie is always talking about?”

“They own the Federal Reserve.”

“What! How can they own a bank in America?”

“America and Britain obviously never cut ties like we all thought. That whole 1776 thing is bullshit. They own us.”

Melanie takes another shot. *I think I’ll play dumb tonight.*

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“Why do you think home owners get tax breaks?” Asks Theo, already half way to drunk.

“Because they own their house?” *Theo loves the sound of his own voice.*

“Because they pay a mortgage. They’re tied down. They’re less likely to rebel against the government because they have this constant worry and need to pay their mortgage. It’s guaranteed that some of these people are liberals that want to stand up for change, but they can’t risk it all. They have to focus on work because they work to pay off their mortgages.”

“So what about people that live-in apartments?” She takes another shot.

“They’re more likely to rebel because they aren’t tied down, they don’t have a mortgage hanging over them. They can leave whenever they want, that’s why they don’t get tax breaks. Tax breaks for home owners are like little rewards handed out to keep the people in line. Say you live in an apartment, doesn’t a tax break sound like a nice treat? Might as well buy a house then. That’s how they pull you in.”

“So what about people who never buy a house?” Melanie looks down at the table and rolls her eyes.

“Student loans.”

“Student loans…” She trails off as she refills her shot glass.

“Exactly,” he says.

“So you’re saying that having to pay off loans is like paying off a mortgage.”

“Debt creates patriotism… Think about it. If you didn’t have loans to worry about, what would you be doing, where would you be?”

“Probably not here.” She takes her shot.

“Exactly! They keep us here by mounting debt onto us.” He takes a shot.

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“What are the three things every human being needs?

“Food, shelter, Tito’s…” Melanie starts to say.

“Water.” Theo takes a shot, then washes it down with fruit punch.

“Right,” she says.

“So what do you think modern warfare is all about?”

“Taking away resources, neglecting human beings, lots of explosions. Nukes!” She takes a shot.

“Depriving people of their three basic needs.”

“Isn’t that what they’re doing in Syria? Fuck. You know there are no more hospitals? I watched a video of the last standing hospital being bombed, there were kids…” Melanie say, then takes a shot straight from the bottle of vodka.

“It’s disgusting, I know.”

“Why isn’t America trying to take out ISIS? How can we just stand by when all of this is happening to human beings?”

“Obvious one.”

“What?” She takes another sip from the bottle.

“ISIS isn’t real.”

“What?” *Oh, Theo, you’re a real sucker tonight.*

“They aren’t real. It’s America.”

“How? I know Hillary and her Hillbots are responsible for killing Qaddafi, but how is America ISIS?”

“It’s just like 911. It was an inside job; kill thousands to make billions. I mean, come on, you had to be a skilled pilot to crash into that building on the first try… There were never any plane parts found at the Pentagon either. I've seen a video of the explosion; nothing points to a plane crash. There is so much proof that our government did this.”

“I agree with that, but get back to the point.” She nudges him with her elbow, and refills her glass.

“Fake Terrorism to make money. To create fear. To control us. To make sure that oil is sold in dollars.”

“Sold in dollars? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oil is sold in dollars; therefore, the US military protects land that has oil. This was all decided during the Nixon administration. We promised to protect them and their oil with our military, so long as oil is sold in dollars. That’s why we have so much interest in the middle east.”

“Then why did we start all those wars? This is crazy.”

“Saddam and Qaddafi had this bright idea that they wanted to sell their oil in euros. America was not happy about that, and so they got taken out. If oil was sold in euros, the American dollar would basically be worth nothing.”

“So that’s why we go to war in middle eastern countries? Because we have to maintain our power over oil… huh.” She lifts her eyebrows in mock disbelief, but hopes it appears like a genuine reaction.

“Yep, our dollar would be worth nothing if we didn't have that power.”

“Do you think Brexit is somehow related to this?” She takes a shot.

“Yeah. I think Brexit was an inside thing too. Britain and America are partners; the Rothschild’s are the 1%, they own the federal reserve, and if the pound were to be converted to euros we would be totally screwed… It’s for the best interest of the United States that Britain separate from the European Union because eventually they would’ve had to convert to euros. As it stands the pound is worth more or equal to the euro.”

“It’s crazy that such a small place can have money worth more than most of Europe.”

“Size doesn’t matter in this case. Did you know that Japan actually owns half of the United States' debt?”

“What? I thought that was China?” She takes another shot.

“Half is owned by China and the other half is owned by Japan.”

“Damn. I never knew that.” She rolls her eyes, and takes another shot.

“It may be surprising because Japan is a tiny island, but they’re amazing with technology, and tech is where all the money is nowadays.”

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“You know, Romania is one of the only real Sovern states.”

“Really, how?” *On, and on, and on… I wonder if he’s noticed that I’m hogging the bottle.*

“Yeah, back in the day when my mom was there, they had this President, Nicolae Ceausescu, a communist and all that… Well, he did something that made everyone poor, but he freed the Romanian people from owning foreign debt. He organized a referendum and somehow changed their constitution, adding a clause that barred Romania from taking foreign loans in the future. That way foreign countries can never come in and enforce any laws. Totally off the world grid.”

“Sounds like an interesting idea, but stealing the people’s money to do it, that’s fucked up,” she says.

“Yeah, but sacrificing your own people for a better future isn’t exactly uncommon, is it?”

“Yeah, you’re right. Damn… The world is so messed up.” Melanie stares at the bottle of Tito’s.

“Knowing all this bothers me on an existential level…” *Poor Theo.*

“Yeah? It’s definitely tough to know how the world really works, makes everything you’re doing seem pointless.” She takes another shot.

“It does. The other night I woke up feeling so anxious, and I couldn’t figure out why, but all this must be getting to me.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking lately, that when I get anxious I just need to think of constants, and it helps me calm down. Just think, the sky will always be blue, the grass will always be green, and nothing else matters,” she says.

“You’ve considered meditation like I suggested, haven’t you?” He laughs.

“Shut up.”

"Another shot?”

"Later, I'm starving." *I drank too much.*

"How about I make us some Ramen?"

"Oh man... but I'm so hungry and your ramen takes at least an hour."

"You know I love making my fancy Ramen! It takes time because I'm upgrading it from the sad little flavor packet to a fine dining experience."

"Well... fine. But please, no weird ingredients this time!"

"Name one time where I added anything weird."

"The leftover pizza chucks." She makes a disgusted face.

"That wasn't weird! It was delicious!"

"For you! You can eat anything; I swear, you're some kind of monster."