Every Year is a New One by Dontyouwaitup

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(ten)  
  
"You'd think by now they'd have come up with something slightly more stimulating than a gigantic ball sliding down a fucking pole." Brian comes in from the kitchen, a glass of whiskey on the rocks clinking in his fist.  
  
Michael raises his eyebrow as Brian sits down. "Thanks for pouring *me* a drink," he says sarcastically.  
  
"Sorry, sport, but there's no grape soda left." Brian reaches beside the sofa and comes up with a whiskey bottle. "Here," he says, thrusting it at Michael. "Enjoy."  
  
Michael rolls his eyes and turns back to the television. "You'd think with all the balls and poles and… sliding… you'd be able to find some kind of… witty innuendo, but I got nothing."  
  
Brian grins and grabs Michael's crotch. "*I* got something," he teases, eyes widening.  
  
"Stop," Michael insists, but when he grabs Brian's wrist he doesn't try to pull him away. "We're going to miss the ball dropping."  
  
"Shame," Brian hums, pressing his face into Michael's neck. Michael smells the way he always has, like cheap shampoo and laundry detergent, paper and lemon bars. "You know, it looks the same as it's looked all the other fifty times you've seen it.  
  
"Fifty-eight."  
  
"Beg your pardon?" Brian's fingers tug at Michael's fly, dip inside.   
  
"We're not fifty, Brian. We're fifty-eight."  
  
"Mikey?"  
  
"Oh...*oh god*. Uh, yeah?"  
  
"You really want to remind me of that disgusting number while my hand's on your cock?"  
  
"Good point."  
  
Brian's eyes slip to the tent quickly forming in Michael's pants. "Yeah, I'll say."  
  
"Okay, fuck Times Square," Mikey chuckles, pulling Brian's hand away and standing up. He's old and he's mostly gray but Michael Novotny still has the grin of a child, and somewhere in there he's still seventeen and dancing in the New Year with Brian on the pedestal at Babylon.  
  
Brian watches as Michael hops over the back of the couch, and bustles about, putting the whiskey away and turning off the television. At some point, Brian's smirk turns into a smile – a quiet one, private, but it's there.  
  
"You coming to bed?" Michael asks, expectant as always, hope still written all over his face even though he hardly needs it anymore.  
  
"Aren't I always?" Brian retorts, then takes a long sip of his drink. "Yeah, Mikey. I'm coming."  
  
Michael pauses, inspects Brian's face carefully. "What."  
  
"Nothing," Brian replies as he stands up and crosses the room, his stride telling nothing of his age. He pokes idly at their stereo until the music rumbles out, something old and pulsing. Michael can't place the song, but his muscles twitch with the memory of dancing to it, years ago. Brian clears his throat. "I was just thinking… I was right. Dance with me."  
  
It's not a question. Michael lets Brian catch him around his hips and grind lewdly against him. This isn't a waltz; they don't have an audience. It's just Brian: music and sex and heat, spinning together. To Michael, this is romance, always has been. "What were you right about?"  
  
Somewhere outside, or downstairs, or over on Liberty Avenue, a countdown begins.   
 *Ten, nine, eight.*  
  
"Hmm? Oh. Everything, obviously. Dance with me, Mikey."  
  
"I already am."  
  
(nine)  
  
Brian's all swagger when he pulls up to the counter, jeans and leather jacket. He's given up on dying his hair and it's going gray at the edges, but if anything, it makes him look sophisticated. Debonair, even. "Turkey sandwich on whole grain. No mayo."  
  
Debbie, on the other hand, hasn't given up on anything. She's got skin like tissue paper now, but she still paints it with gaudy eye shadow and she still wears her wig proudly, piled on top of her head like a crown. "Yeah, fuck you," she replies. "There's a dumpster out back if you're hungry."  
  
"The dumpster you found the dead kid in. Nice, Deb."   
  
"His name was Jason Kemp. Get out of my diner."  
  
"Jesus fucking Christ, Debbie. I just want a goddamn sandwich."  
  
Debbie slams her palm down on the counter. There are customers clearing their throats, hemming and hawing and trying to get her attention. "Wait a damn minute, I'm taking care of important business!" she hollers at the customers, then turns back to Brian. "And like I said. Fuck you. You hurt my kid. Get outta my diner, shithead."  
  
"Your kid is fifty fucking years old and can take care of himself, Debbie."  
  
"You're damn right he can," Debbie says. She's waving a knife around, mayonnaise still clinging to the edges. "But I'm not dead yet, and 'til I am, I'm gonna take care of him. And I think you know that, otherwise, you'd have walked outta here ten minutes ago."  
  
"Right," Brian scoffs. "I'm just *dying* to hear your usual diatribe about what a waste of space I am, about how all I care about is getting my fucking dick sucked."  
  
"Yeah. All you care about is getting your dick sucked. And yourself. And your money, and your clothing. And *Michael*."  
  
Brian opens his mouth to protest, but Debbie's eyes widen threateningly. "Yeah," he says, his voice breaking.  
  
"So what the *fuck* were you doing at the mother fucking *bath house*? And my kid having to hear about it from a couple of twinks at the comic book store. 'Brian Kinney, back on the prowl.' You're fifty fucking years old, as you so eloquently put it. Put your old cock in your pants and-."  
  
"My cock is none of your fucking business-."  
  
"Bullshit.  
  
"-and I wasn't on the prowl. I was just... I was just looking. I didn't touch anybody, and I didn't-."  
  
"Right. You expect me to believe that Brian Kinney-."  
  
Brian sigh. "I'm so fucking tired of being 'Brian Kinney'."  
  
Debbie stares at him for a moment. There's a fraction of a second where his age shows around his eyes, around the center of his bottom lip, and then the second is gone. She caught it, though. She knows this boy better than anyone has, knows the fifteen year old he once was, knows the man that he's going to be long after she's dead.   
  
She remembers a time when she thought for sure she'd outlive him, figured he'd take a dive off the top of a building, get found in a dark corner of a back room, fade away slowly in a hospital bed after catching something awful. Now, she knows he's not going anywhere.  
  
So she reaches for the whole grain loaf, never taking her eyes off him. "What, exactly, do you mean by that."  
  
"Nothing. I just... I didn't do anything at the bath house. I just needed to see if..." He scowls. "If 'Brian Kinney' was still... whatever."  
  
And then - "*You're* Brian Kinney," Michael says from behind him. Brian turns, and Michael's standing there, feet shoulder width apart, a fighting stance if there ever was one. "And you'll always be young, and you'll always be beautiful. I've known that for-fucking-ever."  
  
Brian swallows, and Debbie puts his sandwich down in front of him, reaches over the counter to pat Michael's cheek, and then waddles off to take somebody's order. "Where've you been," Brian asks.  
  
"Staying with her and Horvath," Michael says. "I'm a million years old and I'm staying with my goddamn mother."  
  
Brian sighs, pokes idly at his sandwich. "You're the one who left."  
  
"You spent half the night at the god damned bathhouse, Brian. And I'm not... I'm not *Justin Taylor*. It's not okay for you to fuck around on me. And don't give me any of that bullshit, how you are who you are. I know who you are."  
  
Brian spins on the stool, turning away from Michael, but Michael knows the lines of his shoulders, can see the struggle there. "You're wrong, you know."  
  
"I don't know you?"  
  
"I won't always be what you said. Young, beautiful."  
  
"Sure you will, Brian," Michael says, all earnest and wide-eyed. "To me, you'll always-."  
  
"I don't want to be anymore."  
  
Michael grins, and Brian can feel it from behind him. "Okay," he says.  
  
Brian clears his throat. "I mean, I'll always be hot. And don't get me wrong, Mikey, I'll *always* be the best fuck in Pittsburgh, possibly in the entire damn world. Until the day I die, mark my words. But... I'm gonna... I'm getting old. And that's so *fucked*. You just gotta let me, okay?"  
  
"I love you," Michael blurts out, as he has a tendency to do.  
  
"Yeah," Brian says, in front of God and Debbie and a handful of drag queens sitting at the corner booth. "You, too, Mikey."  
  
(eight)  
  
Justin looks like Brian expected him to. Still shocking blonde, looking years younger than the thirty-something he is now. And Brian would be lying to himself if he said something didn't twist up in his chest, seeing him finally after all these years. But Brian's lied to himself about worse, and when Justin asks him how he's been, he'll say "Fucking fabulous," and that'll be the truth.  
  
That'll be what matters.  
  
Brian's here for Gus, though that might be a lie, too. Though Brian hasn't seen Justin in a million years, he's still a part of their slightly absurd extended family. Gus is fifteen years old. He's into art, shitty music, and dark-haired girls. He goes to Temple with Mel and sometimes he lets J.R. tag along when he and his friends go to the movies. He's a good student if you don't count the time he got suspended for smoking up with his girlfriend in the girls' locker room.  
  
Gus is everything that Brian was and everything he wasn't, so when he calls and says "Listen, Dad, Justin's gallery is opening in New York and I'm invited, but Mom's got her class and Mama's in the middle of some really fucked up case, and they won't let me go alone, so would you-..." Brian just books himself a ticket and braces for something.  
  
Gus is tall and lanky, but Brian's stride is still longer, and he's paces ahead of Gus on the sidewalk. It's late, and Chelsea is filled with a million kinds of people - college students with frozen yogurt, fags with spiked pink hair, old women with grocery bags. "Dad, wait up."  
  
Brian turns around, walks backwards, grinning at his kid. "Hurry, hurry, hurry," he teases, and Gus grins and catches up. "So how's the girlfriend," Brian asks as they walk, digging for a cigarette.  
  
Gus grins and pushes his hair out of his eyes. "Broke up with her, she got kinda boring. I'm trying to hook up with this cheerleader now, but she's giving me the run-around something fierce. I'll do it, though. Can I have one?"  
  
Brian shakes his head. "You shouldn't be smoking," Brian says. "Cigarettes, anyway. And you shouldn't be smoking weed in school. That's what movie theaters and alleys are for."  
  
"Shit, how'd you know about that?"  
  
"I'm a dad. I know everything."  
  
"How's Michael?"  
  
Brian rolls his eyes. "You could ask him yourself if you called a little more often."  
  
"I try, Dad, I just get busy. So are you gonna marry him?"  
  
Every part of Brian wants to say *none of your fucking business*, but it *is* Gus's business, so he just puts an arm over his kid's shoulder. "Don't need to," he says. "This is it, I think."  
  
Justin looks like Brian expected him to. He smells different when Brian hugs him, new cologne, new shampoo, new life. "How've you been, Brian?" he asks, his voice muffled against Brian's shoulder.  
  
Brian squeezes once, hard but not desperate, and then steps back. "Fucking fabulous," he says. It's true.  
  
Justin presses his lips together hard. They watch one another for a moment, and it's not longing, it's just looking, staring at a part of their lives that's over. A part of their lives that was good, in all of its imperfection. A span of five dizzy years that made all the difference, five years that changed them and turned them upside down.  
  
Five years that were over ten years ago. "It's good to see you," Brian says. When he gets home, Michael will ask him how it was, and Brian will say "Fucking fabulous," and it'll be the truth, and it'll be what matters.  
  
(seven)  
  
Brian had stumbled into the loft, his hand still wrapped around the neck of the bottle he convinced the bartender at Babylon to sell him. "Thanks for the ride."   
  
Michael had tossed the keys onto the kitchen counter. "I'm taking your car back to my apartment. I'll bring it by in the morning."  
  
"Or, Mikey, you could just stay." Brian had yanked his shirt above his head, letting it drop to the floor, tripping over it.   
  
"I can't. I've got to..."  
  
"Nothing. You've got nothing to go home to, so you might as well fucking stay."  
  
Michael had nodded, tugged his shirt off, and they'd both fallen lazily into bed with their jeans still on.  
  
And now it's morning, and Michael can feel Brian against his back, all wrapped around him in sleep. Michael's holding his breath, because in a few minutes the alarm is going to go off, and Brian is going to wake up and realize that Michael's not Justin. But for now, Michael wants to know what this feels like, Brian pressed against him, breath fluttering through Michael's hair, morning wood against Michael's leg.  
  
Brian starts to stir, and Michael, as usual, is waiting - for him to mumble Justin's name, or maybe just roll away, back to his side of the bed. And then-  
  
Brian's arms tighten, his nose burying low against Michael's spine. "Mikey," he murmurs, and then exhales hard. "Morning."  
  
"Hey."  
  
"What the fuck happened last night?"  
  
"Babylon. You were trashed."  
  
"Hmm. I enjoy myself, at least?"  
  
Michael shakes his head. "You didn't get laid. You didn't even try, Brian. You mostly just got drunk." He starts to pull away, but Brian holds him tightly. He can still feel Brian's cock, solid and present against him. "Come on, Brian, I have to open the store."  
  
"You don't have to do anything," Brian says. "That's the beauty of owning our own business. You just... you can just stay."  
  
"Seriously, joke's over. Let me out of bed."  
  
Brian pushes up on one elbow, sliding the other hand over to Michael's chest, to hold him down. "Michael," he says, his voice gravelly with sleep and drink and something else. Michael gives in, for a moment, when Brian dips down and kisses him, catches his top lip. And then Brian's mouth opens, wide and insistent, and Michael gives it another moment before he pulls away.  
  
"Stop, Brian."  
  
When Brian pulls back, there's an expression on his face that Michael doesn't know, flushed and scared and... an expression that Michael doesn't have a name for, or a reaction. "Don't want to," Brian says, and then there's his mouth again, and Ben's gone and nothing's worked out the way it's supposed to and Michael can't keep doing this, can't keep pushing Brian away because he's not strong enough.  
  
Except... he is. "Fucking - *stop*." Michael twists up, falls off the bed and rockets to his feet.   
  
"Mikey."  
  
"Don't fucking *Mikey* me. Okay? I'm not - that's not what I am. This is bullshit, Brian, you want me because there's nobody else right now." Every part of Michael is burning with anger; he's fired and he's hard, panting and turned on, but mostly it's the anger.  
  
"Michael," Brian says, and he's the opposite - he's a lazy, hungover Saturday morning with sleep in his eyes and thirty years of *Michael* swimming in the skin of his cheeks. "You're right. There's nobody else." He moves, slowly swinging his legs over the bed, feet on the floor, standing up. He wasn't always taller than Michael. He used to be tiny, all elbows and the smallest feet, and then there was the tenth grade and a growth spurt, muscles and skin and these *hands* that Michael couldn't stop thinking about. That Michael hasn't stopped thinking about.  
  
And now one of them is reaching forward, a thumb skimming Michael's cheekbone, fingers curving around the back of Michael's head. Brian's lips are twitching, fighting the words he's about to say. "There's *never* been anybody else, Michael."  
  
It's a lie, but it's true.   
  
Brian swallows, and then pulls his hands away from Michael. "It's okay," he whispers, "If you want to go. You can go, and I'll see you at Woody's after work. That's fine. But if you want to stay... that's okay, too."  
  
Thirty years. Michael has been thinking about this for thirty years, imagining what it would feel like. "You know I can't just..." Michael lifts a hand to gesture, but Brian grabs it in the air, holds onto it.  
  
"Yeah, I know," Brian says, and then he's leaning forward, and Michael's fucked either way.  
  
(six)  
  
It's the late matinee at the theater, and Brian can't believe he's back here but lately, he doesn't tend to say no to things that make him feel thirty years younger than he is. Plus, they're showing his favorite old movie, and Mikey practically begged.  
  
*There are not many chances in life to be happy. And I think that we have one right now.*  
  
Brian's lips move along with Marlon Brando's. "I love this movie."  
  
"I love this *weed*. Where did you get this shit?" Michael sucks harder on the joint, not bothering to pass it back to Brian, who lost interest half an hour ago.  
  
"That pig Anita moved back from Philly. Ran into her a couple days ago down on Liberty."  
  
"Jesus, Brian, this probably isn't even pot. This is probably crack, laced with, like, dog shit, or-."  
  
"You like it, don't you? Watch the fucking movie."  
  
Michael coughs and a few people sitting below them look up and glare. True to form, Brian leans forward and flips them the bird. "What were you doing on Liberty Avenue, anyway?" Michael asks, grabbing Brian by the wrist and pulling the offending finger back. "Thought you didn't care to hang out down there since you sold the club. Haven't you been finding your... entertainment... elsewhere, lately?"  
  
"I was just checking out the sights, Mom, no big deal. You know, you talk a lot when you're stoned."  
  
Michael giggles and takes another hit. Brian can literally see him struggling to keep his mouth shut, to watch the movie in silence, but Michael's never been very good at keeping things in.  
  
"Oh, Christ. Michael, what's wrong?"  
  
"It's Ben."  
  
Every muscle in Brian's body changes, at that instant, every part of him becomes about protecting his best friend. "Mikey. Is he sick?"  
  
"No."  
  
"Then-."  
  
"He's leaving."  
  
"Mikey."  
  
"It's just... there's this thing, in Tibet. A teaching position. And Hunter's at school, and Ben's healthy, you know, his T-cell count's never been better, so..."  
  
"So he's just fucking leaving? And that whole ceremony, where he, you know, promised to-."  
  
"Actually, he wants me to go with him. The store's been doing well, and we can afford to shut down for a year, if we lease the house..."  
  
"But you're not going."  Brian reaches across and takes the joint from Michael, but he doesn't put it to his lips.  Instead he stubs it out on the arm rest and flicks it over the balcony.  Let some kid find it, have a fun afternoon.  Whatever.  
  
Michael shrugs. "Lately, it's just been... Hunter's gone, and the house is... quiet."  
  
"Mikey."  
  
Michael won't meet Brian's eyes. "Weren't they going to tear this place down?"  
  
Brian doesn't remember. Brian can't think about anything right now, his mind is running off track and he's struggling to catch up with it. He's not sure he can remember the last time anything felt like this. "I vaguely recall hearing something along those lines. A long time ago."  
  
"Guess they changed their minds."  
  
"Guess they did."  
  
(five)  
  
In the summertime, there's a guy who sets up a pretzel stand in the middle of the park. It's all Gus has been able to talk about since they got off the plane from Toronto.  
  
"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" he shrieks, skipping ahead of Brian. Michael's still a few paces farther behind because he insists on stopping every second and a half to coo at J.R. and dangle various toys above her stroller.  
  
"I'm hurry, hurry, hurrying." Brian tries to sound bored, but fails. "Michael! If you don't fucking hurry, hurry, hurry, I'm -."  
  
"Don't use that word in front of my kid, asshole," Michael snaps as he catches up.   
  
"You sound more like your mother every day."  
  
"I know. And just for good measure, can you *believe* how much they've grown? Gus is practically ready to run off to college."  
  
"He's not even six," Brian laughs, but the little boy skipping ahead of them has hands like Brian's and eyes like Lindsay's, a voice like Melanie's. Something in the way he wrinkles his brow when he's concentrating reminds Brian of Justin. The kid is growing up, and Brian can't help but feel like he's missing it. The surprise is that he doesn't want to.  
  
"So. You thinking about Justin a lot lately?"  
  
Brian's neck nearly snaps as he looks over at Michael. "No."  
  
"Liar, you just were."  
  
"Fuck you," Brian says dully. "I think about a lot of things, Mikey. Planes and trains and automobiles. Lions and tigers and bears."  
  
"Oh my!" Gus adds as they arrive at the pretzel stand.  
  
"Well thank God your mothers have at *least* exposed you to Judy," Brian deadpans. "Now all Daddy has to do is teach you the discreet way to expose yourself to all the pretty boys at-."  
  
"I'll take a pretzel with extra butter," Michael cuts him off, speaking too loudly to the vendor. "And Gus here wants one with cinnamon sugar."  
  
"Give me a cheese one," Brian adds, pulling out his wallet.  
  
"I thought you were watching your fucking carbs?"  
  
"I thought we were watching our fucking language."  
  
A mother glares at them angrily, covering her daughter's ears, but Brian's face reflects only indignation without a trace of regret. As usual.  
  
"They gotta learn sometime, lady."  
  
Michael smiles sheepishly at the back of the woman's head as she's walking away. "Seriously, Brian. When was the last time you talked to Justin?"  
  
"Seriously, Mikey, I don't know. And it's none of your fu-... It's none of your business, anyway."  
  
"Do you miss...I mean. Has it been quiet around the loft?"  
  
"I don't mind it," Brian says. "At first, I minded, and now... I don't. That's pretty much the whole story, Mikey, so-."  
  
"You know, it's okay, Brian. If it still hurts. You really love him, we know you do, so you might as well just come out and say it. You love him and you're allowed to miss him."  
  
"Nothing hurts, Mikey. Nothing broke. Nobody's got fucking cancer. And I have no problem saying it, either. I really fucking loved him."  
  
Michael pauses for a moment, making observations that he'd never voice. "Well, at least we know it's possible, you know? For you to fall in love. At least nobody can call you heartless anymore."  
  
"Mikey," Brian says, giving him a pointed glare while handing him a pretzel. Brian bends down so that Gus can climb up onto his shoulders. "I always knew it was possible."  
  
"No, I mean, like-."  
  
"I know what you mean, Michael. I knew it was possible. Just didn't necessarily always-."  
  
"Daddy, I want to go on the swings," Gus says, sticky fingers tangling in Brian's hair. Brian glances upward.  
  
"Figures you'd be a swinger," Brian replies, and then he and his son are stepping off the path, leaving J.R. gurgling happily and Michael waiting, as usual.  
  
(four)  
  
The door screams on its runner as Michael yanks it open anxiously. "Christ," he breathes. "Sorry, I'm sorry. I know I'm late."  
  
Brian is sitting in the glow from the computer, edged in blue and white. "Late for what, exactly?" His fingers slip across the keys a few times before he sits back, crossing his arms over his chest.  
  
"For hanging out!" Michael holds up a paper bag, stinking of fried chicken, grease already darkening the corners. Brian flinches when Michael drops the bag on the couch, mouth twisting uncomfortably, but he doesn't say anything. Leather can be replaced.  
  
"Right. Hanging out. You know, Mikey, just because you're married doesn't mean you have to start fattening up right away. I'm not eating that."  
  
Michael crosses the floor, stuffing a handful of fries into his face. "Okay, well, it's King of Babylon tonight-."  
  
"I hate that shit." Brian leans back precariously in the chair, and grabs Michael's hand, tugging until Michael plunks awkwardly onto his lap. "So, Mikey, how's the Professor and Pretty Woman?"  
  
"Let go," Michael squirms, but he's laughing. This is how it feels, this push and pull and catch and release. "Ben and Hunter are good. Except there are these kids across the hall, and Ben's been having these headaches, and the parties are loud and I think Ben's- what's that?"  
  
"What?"  
  
Michael stands up, bends over the computer. "Liberty Air confirmation page. Where you going?"  
  
Brian shoves off the chair and stalks across the apartment, disappearing into the bedroom as he pulls his work shirt away from his shoulders. "I'm going out. It's King of fucking Babylon tonight; said it yourself."  
  
Michael's eyes are still on the computer screen. Thank you for choosing Liberty Air, and he can feel Brian buzzing through the walls, in the air, can sense the change in temperature since the last time he was here. "Oh, my god, you're going to L.A. You're going to visit Justin."  
  
"I'm not."  
  
"You are."  
  
Brian appears back in the doorway, a shirt in each hand. He looks, for an instant, like he's going to argue, but Michael is standing there, expectant, and then- Brian sags against the frame, dropping his head. "For fuck's sake."  
  
There's this look on Michael's face, like he knows everything already, like he's looking right through Brian. "You really love him, don't you."  
  
Brian holds the shirts up. "Black or grey?" But Michael just keeps watching him, so he chooses grey, tugs it over his head, arcing into it while he's turning away so that Michael can see the line of his spine disappearing beneath the silk. "It's quiet around here lately," he says, and it's as much an answer as it isn't one.  
  
Michael smiles. "I bet L.A.'s fucking awesome this time of year."  
  
(three)  
  
"You're what?" The entire diner turns to stare, but Michael barely notices.  
  
Brian, however, holds up a select finger at the gawking queens before he narrows his eyes at Michael. "I'm nothing. Couple months ago I hung out at the Gravel Pit, jerked off into a paper cup, and now Lindsay done gone and turned that little stick blue. Shucks."  
  
"You're having a baby."  
  
"Lindsay is having a baby. I had an orgasm. And now, I'm trying to have my lunch. Turn the dramatics down, would you?"  
  
"You said you weren't going to do it!"  
  
"I didn't say that."  
  
Michael's pink plate special is cooling, his fork still in the napkin. "You said she'd probably find a better father for her kid if she scraped some random spunk off the floor of the darkest corner of Poppers' back room and shoved it up her cunt."  
  
"And I stand by that. Firmly."  
  
"Jesus."  
  
"And it's a boy, by the way. Just found out."  
  
"She already - how long have you known about this?"  
  
Brian rolls his eyes and takes a sip of his diet coke. "I don't know what it has to do with you, Michael. Besides, you love kids. I'm sure Lindsay'd let you babysit, once you quit forgetting to turn the oven off and losing your damn keys all the time."  
  
Michael's face falls. "Right. You having a kid has nothing to do with me."  
  
"Come on, Mikey. It's hardly got anything to do with me, for fuck's sake."  
  
"So, what. You're just gonna let him not have a dad? Grow up without any male influence in his life, and-."  
  
Brian feigns shock, his voice thick with sarcasm. "You're right, Mikey. He might… oh god… he might turn out to be one of them faggot types."  
  
"Stop fucking condescending to me," Michael says suddenly, standing up from the booth, his movements jerky and stuttering, his face practically twitching with all the different emotions. "You don't know what it's like not to have a dad." He tosses a few crumpled bills onto the table, not even close to enough to cover his untouched meal.  
  
Brian groans and follows Michael as he leaves the diner. It's freezing out and Brian's coat is lying on the booth, but Michael takes more note of the goosebumps than Brian ever bothers to.  
  
"You're right," Brian shouts, freezing fingers fumbling in his pockets for a cigarette. "I only wish I'd been so lucky."  
  
Michael hesitates, turns around. "You're having a kid."  
  
Lindsay's having a kid, Brian thinks again, but Michael looks like he's about ready to start throwing punches and Studs & Suds is coming up; Brian doesn't need a bruise. "Something like that."  
  
"Jesus. I feel so… grown up. I feel like I just grew up without my consent."  
  
"This has nothing to do with you."  
  
Michael nods with his lips pressed together tightly. "One of these days," he says, "you're gonna figure out that when you go and change everything, you're not the only one you affect. When you change everything… everything changes. And one of these days, you're gonna figure that out."  
  
He leaves Brian standing on the corner in front of the diner, without a jacket or a lighter. But six months later he'll be laughing, pushing Brian out of the way as they race down the hospital corridor. Six months later it will be Brian and Michael screaming down the hallways, grinning and waiting and only just beginning. Brian can already see it.   
  
(two)  
  
"Man, this is so much cooler than your dorm room."  
  
"Yeah, whatever. Quit hogging the fucking bong, Mikey."  
  
Michael passes it over, his eyes still wandering around the tiny college apartment Brian shares with a fat chick from New York and a math major who's never around. Brian hates it, with its dusty corners and the way the sink always smells like old beer, but Michael can't get enough of the way the couch sags in the middle or the faded, curling Brooke Shields poster over the door.  
  
"I want to hear all about spring break. I still can't believe you got to go to Mexico while I was working the slurpee machine at the seven eleven. So not fair."  
  
Brian has stories about Mexico. He has stories about dark alleys, about bricks pressing lines into his cheek. Stories about lines of white powder on the desk in the motel room, about He has stories about dancing under green and purple lights, stories about the way the lights look shining down on shot glasses overflowing with tequila, stories about the way the tequila tastes when it's sucked off the stomach of some dark skinned, panting boy whose hair keeps falling in his eyes.  
  
But Michael had spent the week at the convenience store, coming home, Brian was sure, with his cuffs stained with grape slurpee and popcorn butter.   
  
"It was alright," he coughs, smoke spilling from his mouth with every word. He holds his wrist out to Michael. "Got a bracelet," he says. "Check it out, it's got my initials carved right there." Michael's eyes light up and Brian lets him thread their fingers together, figures what's the harm in that. "Got a case of crabs, probably, too, from the nasty ass motel. But other than that –" *sex, drugs, booze, sin, sex, sex, sex* "-probably wasn't that different from whatever you were doing back in the Pitts."  
  
"You're so full of shit," Michael says, but he leans into the hollow above Brian's hip and Brian can feel him relaxing, softening.  
  
Brian coughs, pushes, and then he's up and away, grabbing their jackets. "Come on. Lindsay's waiting for us at this pathetic party."  
  
Michael's limbs are heavy with the weed and he fumbles, a little, getting his sleeves into his jacket. "Wait, okay, so whose birthday is it, again? And Brian, who the fuck is Lindsay?"  
  
The party isn't pathetic, at least not by Michael's standards. It starts off a little slow, sure, with Lindsay crying into Brian's shoulder about something or other. And there's an incident where Brian is screaming at some dark haired girl named Rebecca, calling her a stupid dyke and a whole bunch of other things – Michael's used to this, watching Brian lash out and lose it. But after Rebecca leaves, Brian's demeanor changes, and he climbs up on the back of the couch with a cup full of punch and hollers "Happy fucking birthday, Billy. You're an asshole. Everybody, have some punch!"  
  
Within a couple of hours, Michael's upside down above the keg, slurping greedily from the hose, with some stranger holding his ankles. He can feel Brian eyeing him amusedly from where Lindsay's got him propped against the counter, trying in vain to keep him upright or pry the vodka bottle from his hands.  
  
Michael finally spits the tap out, beer dribbling into his nose, kicking and laughing "Okay, okay, let me down."  
  
Brian isn't at the counter anymore, so Michael wipes his mouth on the back of his sleeve and shoves through the crowd.  
  
"Hey, hey Billy? You seen Brian?"  
  
Billy pushes a wave of blonde hair out of his eyes. "Who the fuck are you?" he slurs.  
  
Michael doesn't bother explaining that they met a few hours ago. And a few hours before that, too. "He's probably just in the bathroom," he thinks out loud. "Hey, happy birthday!"  
  
Brian isn't in the bathroom, though, or any of the bedrooms. Michael even checks underneath the pool table for good measure, and then outside in the bushes.  
  
It's dark out, and cold for March, and Michael's drunk and the lights from the houses and dorms are brighter than they should be, smudging and bleeding at the edges. Fucking Brian, spiked the punch.  
  
He makes his way back to Brian's apartment eventually. It takes longer than it should have; Michael thinks he probably made a few circles before he actually found the place.  
  
The door isn't locked. "Brian?"  
  
There's noise coming from the bedroom, and Michael sighs. Typical, Brian ditching him in the middle of a strange town so that he can take some guy home.  
  
Michael scowls, stumbling drunkenly toward Brian's door. He doesn't bother knocking, hasn't for years. Brian doesn't have anything Michael hasn't seen.  
  
Except this.  
  
Michael feels the alcohol churning his stomach around as Lindsay gasps and pulls the sheet up over her breasts. "Oh," Michael breathes. He bites his tongue so hard he tastes blood.  
  
Brian grabs a pillow from behind Lindsay, tossing it at Michael as her head falls back. "Shut the fucking door, Mikey!" he snarls.  
  
Michael doesn't catch the pillow, just lets it collide and fall as the door clicks behind him.  
  
(one)  
  
It's the same thumpa-thumpa that it always is, that it always will be, and it's about to be 1988 and as usual, Michael is looking for Brian. Sometimes, Michael thinks he's going to spend the rest of his life looking for Brian.  
  
It's New Years Eve and Brian dragged him out, and there were a million images in Michael's head of standing next to Brian at midnight, of Brian dipping him back and kissing him into the new year. Instead… he's just looking for Brian.  
  
He pushes past a bunch of writhing bodies, pulsing and sweating, and dips into the darkness of the back room. "Brian!"  
  
He hears Brian groaning from behind the corner and pauses, hesitates to listen to that low, hoarse sound. As usual, he's hard instantly, blindingly so. His mother likes to mortify him by reminding him (and everyone within a rather impressive hearing distance) that at his age, anything can do that, but it's not true – nothing turns him on like the way that Brian sounds. Except for maybe the way that Brian looks, or possibly the way he smells.  
  
He exhales, shuddering a bit and reining all of his pieces back in before ducking around the corner. "Brian."  
  
Brian grins, shameless, pants around his ankles and shirt caught on his forearm. "Yo, Mikey," he laughs, panting, pulling out and then pressing up again into the guy he's got pinned to the wall. "Meet my new pal Todd."  
  
Michael tries, desperately, to keep his eyes away from the place where Brian and Todd are connecting, releasing and colliding again. He scowls, blushes. "Hey, Todd; how's it going."  
  
"Fine," the guy all but moans, stuttering and missing the beat as Brian drives up again, hard.  
  
"What's up?" Brian grunts, the smile on his face thick and smudgy. "Aside from the obvious."  
  
"It's gonna be midnight pretty soon," Michael says, trying and failing at keeping his tone even, at trying to keep the desperation away from his voice. "Just wanted you to know." And then he's turning away, walking back, ready to go dance or maybe just to keep walking, straight out past the people and the bouncers and onto the avenue that still feels unfamiliar, into the diner that always has been. And maybe this is a life-altering moment. Maybe he'll walk out of Babylon and stay out, maybe he'll finally drop this, Brian and all of it, and-.  
  
And then Brian's grabbing him by the back of the shirt. "Looks like we'd better get out there, then." He keeps the hand wrapped around Michael's jacket, uses the other one to pull out, pull the condom off and toss it aside haphazardly.  
  
Todd is too stoned to bitch, and Brian just thumps him on the back. "Look at it this way," Brian says as he's tucking himself – still hard, still ferociously hard - back into his pants, "You may not have gotten a chance to finish here, but-" he throws out his arms, displaying himself, selling himself "-you've now got all this as jack off material for the rest of your life. Enjoy."  
  
Michael's grin nearly splits his face in half, and he forgets about leaving, forgets about going anywhere except for where Brian's pulling him.  
  
Out of the back room, through the people, up onto the platform where Brian shoves a go-go boy aside, tosses him a twenty and tells him to take a break. The new screens they've installed all over the walls are running the countdown, just minutes to the new year as Brian yanks Michael against him.  
  
"Dance with me," Brian breathes, though Michael already is.  
  
Their hands go above their heads and catch the light, carry it down so that it reflects off their ridiculous shirts and glows around them. "You know," Michael says, "I think this was the best year ever."  
  
"Fuck that," Brian growls, or at least that's what Michael thinks he says, drowned out by the bass.  
  
"Next year," Michael says, "Everything's gonna change. You're gonna leave for school and-."  
  
"Fuck, Mikey, would you shut up? I'm here now, okay, and that's all that matters." Brian moves closer, which shouldn't even be possible, and Michael can't breathe. "Now just… fucking dance with me."  
  
Michael can feel Brian's hard on and his mouth falls open. "Christ," he breathes, but Brian can't hear him above the music, and something in Michael stops pretending for a minute. His hands curl into Brian's hair where it's getting too long in the back and he pulls his mouth down, biting hard on Brian's lower lip.  
 *Six, five, four.*  
  
He's kissing with every part of him, except for the place in the back of his mind that's busy waiting for Brian to pull away like he always does. Brian just tugs him closer, though, so that their hips cradle each other as they grind together.  
  
Brian dips his sweaty forehead down against Michael's neck, breathing hard. Michael just holds on. "You know," he shouts, sure his voice is just barely audible above the roar of the men around them, counting seconds like they matter. "My mom says that the way you spend midnight on New Years' is the way you're gonna spend the whole rest of the year. You ever heard that?"  
  
"Mikey, it's you and me. This is the way we're going to spend next year, the rest of our fucking lives; you know that. *Dance with me*," Brian insists.  
 *Three, two, one.*  
  
Michael already is, always has been.