

Hongbin doesn't remember waking up.

It's like the start of a film, a sudden beginning: his eyes are wide open, his lips are parted, his body is sore, and the ceiling above him is startlingly clean and white. The air around him is heavy and cloying and he's not sure why he's covered in his heavy comforter, the one he's sure he packed away a month ago when summer was just a distant thing approaching on the horizon.

There's a memory in the back of his mind, something he can't fool himself into thinking was a dream, and it's fading away from him already but he grabs at it desperately, at the dull edges and the cloudy middle, none of it giving him anything concrete to hold onto. It hurts him to remember, makes him shake a little to think about what he was doing and it was—*running*.

It was running. Running like something (*someone*) behind him, chasing him, but he was too scared to look back and see what it was, see if it was anything at all. Somehow he thinks that the reason he was running is more important than whatever it was he was running from, that if he could just remember that one thing it would cause everything to fall into place, but it's no use.

His room is comforting in its familiarity—the dark blue walls remind him of the beginnings of a warm summer evening, like all the times he's sat on the steps near his childhood home with Hakyeon, the two of them discussing their futures—and he sits up so he can focus on the pictures he has hanging up, the ones in frames and the ones affixed to the walls with pins and tape alike.

It takes him a minute to realize that none of the things he's looking for are there. Instead there is a distinct absence, there are blank walls, there is a box at the side of his bed that is empty when he leans over and peers inside of it. He feels hollow.

There is absolutely nothing to tell him where he has been or what has happened to him and his head is full of static like a television station with no signal, broken and lost and being watched by one lonely person who's just waiting for something to break through, for the broadcast to start again—but there's nothing.

Except—he thinks he's seeing things for a moment but he's *not*—there is something, he realizes as he blinks away tears, a picture he's never seen, set gently and carefully, leaned up against a stack of notebooks, too far away for him to see the contents of from where he's propped himself up on his elbows in bed.

He gets up and it's not easy. He still feels weak and sick to his stomach (more than he rightfully should, more than it makes sense for him to, and he can't figure out why). He sits on the edge of his bed for a whole minute, watching the clock at his bedside the whole time, counting the seconds as if he has a reason to.

When he stands he almost comes crashing down, almost falls to the floor, a headache slamming into him like he imagines a train might, and he's imagined that before, imagined the one step he would have to take—but it subsides after a minute, leaves him as quickly as it came and he takes the next few steps without problem.

His hands shake as they pick up the picture, but he's used to that sort of thing, used to having to steady the things he holds with pursed lips and narrowed eyes, concentrating as best he can on the one thing left that might tell him what this all means.

It's a picture of him and Hakyeon and for a moment the sight sets his heart at ease, Hakyeon's arm around his shoulder and an easy smile on his face, until he realizes he has no recollection of taking the picture.

The hanging lights in the background look like stars and the trees around them are so green, so crisp, the smile on his face is so real—he didn't take this picture, but he loves the person who did, at least in the moment, in the single second that it took for them to point and click, Hongbin loved them.

But he's never seen the picture in his life, he's never been to a place where the whole of the world looks like it's shining.

He turns and sees, for the first time, that his window is wide open, that a breeze is blowing the white, sheer curtains there.

He's covered in sweat and it's the middle of summer, but he feels cold all over.

He's never been in love.

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Hakyeon is a tall, bright fixture in a crowd of people, standing above everyone with one arm extended over his head and waving frantically and his other hand at the side of his mouth as he yells, "Hongbin, over here," in a way that would be embarrassing if Hongbin wasn't so happy to see him.

(Hakyeon has always embarrassed him a *little*, has always poked his cheeks and brought up things he'd rather forget, but he's also always done it with a smile on his face, with no intention to hurt him and there aren't enough people in Hongbin's life who he can trust to be that way so he takes what he can get.)

When Hakyeon's hand touches his arm he feels at home despite the fact that *home* is half a country away, that his mother's smile isn't something he'll see in person for months and that's if he's lucky. The thing is, with Hakyeon grabbing his duffle bag and chattering next to him about

every inane thing that's happened in the few weeks since they've talked on the phone, it's easy to forget those things.

The airport they're in is a huge, spacious place with sunlight streaming in through glass-plated walls, people walking and talking, some of them running, some of them laughing, all of them making Hongbin feel closed in and trapped and nervous, his skin crawling like someone is watching him even though there's (probably) no one who is.

"It'll be better when we get out of here," says Hakyoon, because he knows, he's the only one who really knows anything at all about what's going on in Hongbin's mind at any given time. He's the only one who's ever bothered to try and find out, to listen and to understand and to not say words like 'useless'.

Hongbin just nods and smiles and asks him to tell him more about his roommate.

Hakyoon's words slide against his skin like his fingers do, softly caressing away his fears and inviting him to walk steadily on.



He stays with Hakyoon for only a few weeks before the apartment he's moving into is ready for him.

He wishes he could stay forever.

Spending his days with Hakyoon sets him at ease, relaxes him right down to the bones, the two of them sitting with softly lit candles between them as they discuss nothing in particular. Words fall from Hakyoon's mouth as easily as memories do from Hongbin's own mind.

"You don't remember, really?" Hakyoon says to him, more than once, because he's forgotten in their time apart just how it works, and Hongbin shakes his head, feels sorry.

"Just general things, you know how I am," he explains and the words echo in his mind, a thousand hazy memories pressed back on one another as he sits with his arms around his legs, watching how the candle casts a dull, bobbing light on Hakyoon's face, makes him look like something to be feared. "I remember feelings more than words and events. I remember talking with you about the future and the warmth in my chest, but not what you said to me. But you say so many things, anyway. How can you expect me to remember them all?"

Hakyeon's roommate, Taekwoon, always emerges from his room in the middle of the evening, asking quietly if they can order out.

He scared Hongbin at first with his imposing stare and tall stance, but now he doesn't want to leave him, knows that he'll miss his soft voice and the way he passes the extra tangsuyuk to him without saying a word despite seeming like the type of guy who hates to share his food.

Taekwoon is a student and sometimes Hongbin hears him playing scales on a keyboard in his room and he thinks that's why Taekwoon's smile looks so sad and why he and Hakyeon found each other.

"We're the same, all of us," Hakyeon says, one night, at dinner and he means the words to be comforting but they make Hongbin freeze and Taekwoon tense up.

"That's true," Taekwoon agrees, and his eyes meet Hongbin's and they say more than Taekwoon ever has out loud to him.

The only reason you play scales over and over, perfectly, is because you're too scared to play real songs anymore.



The apartment looks the same as it did online, deep, night sky blue walls and stainless steel appliances in the kitchen, all of it perfect for his mother to pay for.

It's small but has a nice view, the type that makes him raise his hands to his face like a viewfinder, looking at things in a context that makes sense to him, a static polaroid of the city below him, cars frozen in time and clouds stuck in place above them, people never getting where they need to go, all of it captured forever in his mind as one impeccable moment.

Things are easier for him to think about in terms of processing, in terms of exposure and lighting. When someone asks him what happened on a certain day he reaches for boxes full of glossy prints and runs his fingers over dates before he finds the right one and can remember the things that happened to him.

Life in snapshots is easier for him than it is in film. Disjointed moments in time put together like a flipbook with missing pages, skips in time and missing memories, but he doesn't mind it so

much because there are things he would rather not remember.

(He doesn't take pictures when he's doubled over in a bathroom stall, throwing up his entire dinner, shaking with fear and self-loathing.)

His first night of living alone he's awake until the sun comes up, he sits in bed and pinches his wrists and rubs at his eyes, splashes his face with water so cold it makes him shiver, trips over boxes he plans on going through the next few days.

When he does sleep it's fitful and he has a nightmare that he doesn't remember, something involving broken glass and a smile sharp as the shards that cut his hands, creating open sores on skin that never heals.



There's a park that only takes five minutes to walk to and he likes it because, if he sits on a certain bench and tilts his head to the side, he can see the top corner of his apartment building in the distance. He takes a few single, solid pictures of the way it looks and he plans to put them in a small collection with other pictures he took in the stairwells and of the parts of his apartment that he thinks are beautiful—the edging around the bottoms of the walls and the patterns in the ceiling.

It only takes him a week to start thinking of the bench as *his*, to start getting mad when he sees other people sitting there. He refuses to sit next to strangers, even a tired but kind looking young woman with headphones in her ears who's obviously taking a break from running. He waits for her to get up and then hurries to sit in the very middle of the bench, to spread out rolls of film and envelopes of old pictures, all things he doesn't really need but that take up space and make him look busy.

Anything to make the prospect of talking to him, sitting next to him, uninviting.

Hakyeon would be mad at him for all of this, but that's why when they talk on the phone he mentions the fact that he's exchanged numbers with the guy who lives next door, as if he's anything more than a name (*Wonshik*) in his contacts now.

He only feels a little bad because Hakyeon seemed so genuinely happy, said, "That's good, that's really good," to him in a quiet voice, the type of voice Hakyeon only uses when he wants you to know he means what he's saying.

The guy next door seems like a good enough person, but he's never home and Hongbin understands what that means, understands it like he always did in high school, people saying, "Hongbin you're so nice," but never anything more.

(He knew they all talked behind his back when he withdrew from school, was sure that they all said they'd never liked him much anyway, nice but *weird*—weird Lee Hongbin who always forgot to do his homework and couldn't talk in front of the class and wouldn't look you in the eye, he had to be hiding something.)

So it's easier, Hongbin thinks, to spread his equipment out and act like he's working on a project.

And who knows, maybe this is just what he needs, maybe he'll find something to work on by accident.

The park is full of people, a group of kids out of school for the day who are eating melting ice cream, an artist who drifts about as he draws things in a large sketchbook, a couple sitting under a tree a few hundred yards away, the two of them wholly and completely focused on one another.

It's the first time that Hongbin really feels like this might have been a good idea, feels like he can do this.

He raises his camera up to his eye with surprisingly steady hands and looks at the world through it and—it's beautiful.



Hakyeon visits his apartment unannounced a few weeks later and the first thing he says is, "It's so clean."

"I don't have anything to do," Hongbin shrugs, "so when I get bored I just put things back where they're supposed to go."

"Come back and live with me," Hakyeon whines, running a finger over the counter as he kicks off his shoes and pulling it away, spotless. "You'd think Taekwoon would be clean but his room is a mess, last week I found half our plates in there and I had to wash them all myself."

"You talk as if you're any better," Hongbin says, shuddering as he remembers visiting Hakyeon's room when he was in high school, dirty clothes everywhere. "I'll consider cleaning your place when you offer to pay me and no sooner."

Hakyeon, for all his boasting that he's like Hongbin's older brother (though Hongbin's always thought of him more as a bustling second mother, an overly doting aunt), sure sounds like a little kid when he's not pleased with what someone else has to say.

But, still, by the end of the night Hongbin doesn't want him to leave.

"Please don't go," he says, curled up on his bed, the top of his head pressed to the side of Hakyeon's thigh. "I can't sleep and I keep getting these terrible headaches."

"Do you want me to get you some medicine?"

"No, I just don't want you to leave."

So Hakyeon doesn't leave and for that one night Hongbin sleeps content and comfortable with the weight of someone else's hand on the nape of his neck. He wishes he could take a picture of that feeling and keep it with him forever. If only he could capture that small comfort, then maybe everything would be alright.



"Can I draw you?"

Hongbin looks up from where he's, pointlessly, cleaning off the back of his camera for the third time in a row to find the young man who he's seen drawing people's portraits in the park for a month now. The first thing he notices is the fact that he has pastel marks all over his hands, all the colors of the sky when the sun is setting are there on his skin.

"I'm Jaehwan." He sits down and Hongbin isn't sure what to do. No one's ever sat down near him before. "And you are?"

"Hongbin."

Hakyeon would want him to say more than that, would want him to say *'it's nice to meet you'*,

but that might turn out to be a lie and Hongbin doesn't want to risk it.

"Hongbin, then." The artist—Jaehwan—has a disarming smile, the type that Hongbin wishes he had instead of his own nervous one. "You can say no, it's alright, that's why I'm asking instead of just doing it. I've seen you coming here recently and thought that maybe you were someone who understood that when I draw pictures of people it's because I want them to see how beautiful they are to me."

"Why would I—" Hongbin looks down at the camera in his hands and remembers, suddenly, how abnormal he is, how the reasons he takes pictures of people and places would sound so strange if he explained them out loud. He wishes he took pictures of his friends and of the architecture around him for the same reasons this artist with his chalk covered hands draws pictures, but instead he's selfish and keeps them to himself, uses his camera to steal memories from others.

"Ah, maybe not," Jaehwan says after a long moment passes and he looks more disappointed than Hongbin can bear as he goes to stand up.

"Tomorrow."

Jaehwan turns to look at him, says, "Hm?"

"Tomorrow—you can draw me tomorrow," Hongbin tells him with a car alarm blaring in the distance, the screams of children playing a game making him feel on edge. "If you still...if you still want to."

Jaehwan smiles again and it's even more genuine this time, spreading all the way to his eyes, to his shoulders and outwards, making Hongbin smile, too.

"Oh, trust me," Jaehwan says, "I'll still want to."



When Jaehwan draws him it's like he's done it a million times before. It seems to Hongbin that he barely looks up from the paper he has spread in front of him yet he's constantly saying things like, "You moved, don't do that, keep your eyes focused on me and don't smile so nervously, *relax.*"



Besides those small comments they don't talk much for the better part of an hour but Hongbin discovers things about Jaehwan in the silence, like the fact that he's right handed but he uses his left hand to press colors into one another, to blend and to mix things. He sees that Jaehwan is passionate, but not intensely so—everything he does is light and fleeting, not dwelled upon, his fingers moving from place to place on the paper, never lingering but always coming back when they need to.

He finds that Jaehwan smiles at the most innocuous of things, at Hongbin trying not to sneeze, at a ladybug that lands on one of the silver spirals of his sketchbook. Jaehwan looks at the bug like its a friend, coaxes it onto the back of his hand and then lets it crawl there for a few moments.

"It'll die soon," Jaehwan says, "so I'm trying to give it a happy memory while I still can."

Hongbin doesn't really understand, he just sees a bug like any other as it feebly makes its way down the curve of Jaehwan's thumb, but he nods gently, anyway, counts the spots on its back (seven, seven of them) as something to remember it by, if he can even do that.

"Tell me about yourself," Jaehwan demands when he's halfway done, when Hongbin can see that the details of his face are roughly there, "and don't ask me what to say. I don't know you, so just tell me things. Not your age or your blood type, just—things, you know? The people who have known you forever, what do they know about you, what would make them think about you? Those types of things."

"I take pictures," Hongbin says, "but they're more than that. If you ask me what I did yesterday I won't be able to tell you, but—if I can look at how blue the sky was in a picture I took then I'll remember how I felt when I looked at it that day. If I can look at how my friend was smiling in a picture then I'll remember the joke they were laughing at, I'll remember if I laughed, too."

"You're forgetful," Jaehwan says.

Hongbin shakes his head, smiles shakily, "I'm a mess."

Jaehwan doesn't say anything for a few minutes, his hands on the mirror image of the folds of Hongbin's shirt, smoothing them out before, finally, he replies with, "I like messes," glances up and adds, "and I like your smile right now, I can tell you mean it. Stay just like that, for me."

"Are you going to change your drawing?" Hongbin asks, confused.

"No, no, just—always. Every time I see you, from now on. I want you to smile like that. And keep your hand where it is, I didn't say you could completely fall apart." Jaehwan makes a scoffing sound in the back of his throat before muttering, "*Photographers*."

Hongbin can't help but laugh a little at that and he hopes that somehow Jaehwan will capture it, his happiness in that moment, and put it on paper, because he'd like to be able to keep what he's feeling right now, tuck it safely away and never let it go.



Jaehwan offers to walk him home and it's such an unexpected thing that Hongbin forgets to say no.

They walk in silence for the first block, Jaehwan with his sketchbook and charcoals and pastels in a long, rectangular box he holds carefully in his right hand and Hongbin with his bulky camera bag in his left. All the buildings they pass are a hundred thousand feet tall, climbing into the sky and towards the sunlight that reflects off the windows, the sunlight that's seeping into the horizon but still causing the concrete beneath their feet to shine like its laced with diamonds, like it's more valuable than it actually is.

"It didn't come out very good," Jaehwan says as they make the turn that brings Hongbin's apartment building into view, Hongbin just a few steps ahead of Jaehwan the whole way there. "The portrait, I mean."

"I liked it...or—no, what I mean is that I liked what I saw of it," Hongbin quickly tells him, saying what he'd want to hear if he was the one feeling unsure of some of his work. "I'm sure there are ways you can improve, but it looked solid to me. You have a handle on anatomy that's very impressive."

"Hm, do you really think so?"

"Yes!" Hongbin nervously ducks his head, hears the word echo off the walls of the building next to them and continues, quieter this time, "Yes, I do think so. I can tell you've been drawing for a long time. It seems like maybe you go to school for it."

"I did for a while," and now they're standing at the front doors of the apartment building and the sun has all but disappeared and Hongbin's cold as he listens to Jaehwan say, "but not anymore. I got sick of being told what to draw, it felt so meaningless—but now? Now I draw whatever I want, whenever I want."

"I wouldn't like to be told what to take pictures of," Hongbin murmurs, his hand tightening on the strap of his camera bag, protecting what's his.

"So, tomorrow can I draw you again?"

"Again?"

"Yes, and the day after that, too—every day until I get it right, until I capture you."

Hongbin thinks, later on, that he should have said no. Shouldn't have let Jaehwan walk him home, shouldn't have agreed that Jaehwan could take as many days from him as he wanted, shouldn't have let the sun slip out of view or the streetlights come on or the darkness swallow every ounce of resistance in his body.

But that's later on, not now—and now he says, "Alright, I'd like that, actually," and he means it more than he's ever meant something he's said at seven in the evening on the side of a busy city road.

And Jaehwan's smile is sweet, is syrupy and slow, is something Hongbin wants to take a picture of someday, is something he never wants to forget.



He notices the cut on his hand for the first time that night after he closes his apartment door behind him and is suddenly struck by the smell of copper in the air hanging heavy around him and he can't find the source until he thinks to raise his arm in front of him and he sees the twin trails of dried blood running all the way down the inside of his forearm.

The cut itself is on the meaty part of his palm and it's long and deep and he can't figure out how he got it without noticing, how he didn't feel something slice into him that deep.

Worse than that, blood makes him sick to his stomach so he ends up in the bathroom dry heaving over the toilet for fifteen minutes, his eyes stinging with tears and his throat hoarse by the time he feels strong enough to stand again.

He cleans the cut as best he can and covers it up, probably more thoroughly than he needs to, but he's scared of the very idea of some blood seeping out under the edges of a simple bandaid, so it's bandages on top of that, all tightly wound and restricted to keep his demons in.

It takes him hours to fall asleep with his heartbeat banging in his head like the incessant beat of

a drum, keeping time for a song he can't even hear the melody of.



Hakyeon calls him a week later when he's pushing around pictures, new and old alike, a kaleidoscope of points in time spreading outwards from where he sits in the center on the floor.

(There's the stray cat that he used to put milk on his back porch for when he was sixteen in one, the remains of the convenience store he used to visit every day after school before it burned down in another, his mother laughing at a joke someone told a long, long time ago in the one furthest away from him—and an endless array of freshly developed pictures full of green grass and a young man bent over a sketchbook, shielding his eyes from the sun, looking at something out of frame, never posing.)

"Have you been busy?" Hakyeon asks, a disembodied voice on the other end of the line, a sound breaking sharply through the static that rings in Hongbin's ears at all times.

"Yes, in a way."

"Did you find a job? I know you said you didn't need to, but I started to think you—"

"It's nothing like that," Hongbin says, words falling like the blunt cut of an ax into the soft, hopeful tone of Hakyeon's voice. "I don't think I could handle—um, well, anything like that, but I made a friend."

"Your neighbor?" and Hongbin breathes a sigh of relief at the way Hakyeon is predictable, at the way his oldest friend shifts like the tides of the ocean from one topic to another, letting Hongbin stand just out of his reach if he needs to.

"No. He's nice, I see him in the mornings sometimes, but no." Hongbin's fingers trace the edge of the picture closest to him. It's one he usually wouldn't have bothered getting developed, fuzzy and blurry, but lately he's wanted to remember moments like those. Even the unclear memories in the past week have felt important, somehow. "I met an artist at the park near my building. He asked to draw me."

"Oh no," Hakyeon murmurs, "an artist, Kong, really?"

"He's good," Hongbin protests, feeling defensive, feeling himself tense up. "He's not *great*, but

he's good. And I—I like him."

Hakyeon's sigh is long-suffering and too loud for the speakers on Hongbin's phone to handle, but he follows it up with, "If you like him then I guess I can't say anything. Just be careful. Artists and actors are all the worst kind of people."

"Oh, but what about dancers?"

"Dancers are the best kind, though they don't like it when their friends forget to call."

Hongbin smiles. He knows that there are more pictures in his room of Hakyeon than he could hope to count.

"I'll keep that in mind."



When Jaehwan draws him it feels like he exists, like someone is seeing him for the first time.

Maybe it's just that Jaehwan notices things about him that he's sure other people don't, like the scar that's usually hidden by the collar of his shirts or the bags under his eyes that people tend to ignore.

"I don't like to ignore things like that," Jaehwan says when he asks about it one afternoon. "Acting like someone's perfect, drawing someone without their flaws...what's the point, then? Why draw anyone if you're going to take away all the details that make them who they are? It'd be like drawing snow from above and making it look perfectly smooth, unblemished and untouched—in the end it would just be a blank sheet of paper."

"You must think I'm silly then, since I edit my pictures before I get them developed," Hongbin muses, quietly, as he watches Jaehwan reach for a new piece of charcoal, no color today.

"No, that's different." Jaehwan finds whatever quality he was looking for in the stick of charcoal he decides on and begins to work on the shoulder of Hongbin's shirt, the folds and shading there. "I understand editing pictures because, otherwise, it's just what you see when you open your eyes, and it's not that that's not beautiful, but—hm."

"It's like when you see the sunset," Hongbin offers, because he's thought about this before, but

he's never actually said it out loud to anyone. "Most of the time I don't even see it happen and when I do I don't pay much attention to it even though it's a really beautiful thing. So when you take a picture of a sunset, when you draw a sunset or write about one or film one with a camera—you have to do something extra to make people pay attention. Because if these amazing things happen every day and we ignore them then why would we stop to look at them in a picture or read about them in a book?"

Jaehwan doesn't say anything for a few long moments and it makes Hongbin sweat at the bottom of his spine, though he knows by now that this is just a thing that happens when Jaehwan's fingers are busy getting the shape of something just right.

Finally he says, "I watch the sunset."

"I'm sorry, it was just an example, I—"

"No, I get it," Jaehwan interrupts, the smile on his face saying *calm down, I understand*, "I think I'm just a bit different than the people you're talking about. I think most artists are. I think *you* are, too."

"Maybe," Hongbin murmurs, doing his best not to look away from Jaehwan's eyes, though he wants to, he's always hated eye contact.

"Definitely." Jaehwan looks at him for another moment and then goes back to the sketchbook on his lap. "I can already tell I'm not going to like this."

"I-It's okay, we have tomorrow, don't we?"

"Yes, that's true, we always have tomorrow."



Hongbin makes a point, later that evening, to watch the sunset from the window in his apartment, to watch it sink beneath buildings and set them on fire and turn the sky into murky watercolors, wishing all the while that someone was sitting next to him making stupid jokes and telling him not move, stay right there, just like that, *I've got you*.



One night there's the sound of someone knocking on his door fifteen minutes after he gets home for the night and he opens his door just an inch to find Jaehwan holding a 50 mm lens in his hand and wearing a disarming smile on his face, saying, "You left this behind and I thought you might miss it."

Hongbin lets him in but it occurs to him to ask, "How did you get in the building?"

"The doorman, he, well," Jaehwan presses the lens into the palm of his hand and it's the first time they've really touched and Hongbin doesn't want him to pull away, "he's seen me with you every night for, what, almost a month now? He recognized me and he said he'd let me up just this once but next time—he said that, *next time*—you'll need to be there with me."

"I can't believe it was that easy," Hongbin says, fingers curling over the lens in his hand now, finding comfort in the way it fits there perfectly.

"People are more trusting than they'd like to admit," Jaehwan shrugs, his eyes roaming the walls of Hongbin's apartment now, widening. "How many pictures do you have, exactly?"

"Oh, I don't know, I've been taking them for so—"

"There's some of me over here, I didn't know you'd gotten these developed."

Hongbin's face heats up, the rising, pricking burn of embarrassment that refuses to subside as he says, calmly, "I didn't think it would really interest you."

"Why? I love these, I look at them and I think: this is what he remembers about me."

"It's not...weird?"

"No, not at all. You know, I don't think you're really forgetful—you just make special care to remember things most people would never think about again. I can't tell you what I was talking about in any of these pictures, all these days look the same to me, but *you*—"

"It was dogs," Hongbin tells him, "there was a dog barking and you barked back. I thought you were crazy, but I laughed anyway."

"See and that's what I mean," and Jaehwan isn't looking at the pictures anymore even though there isn't much else to look at, as far as Hongbin is concerned. "Of course, now that you mention it I can pull up some lingering memory from that day, but I never would have been able

to do even that without you reminding me of it. You're better than you realize."

Hongbin stands still in the middle of his apartment and he can hear everything—Jaehwan's breathing, the bass of the music his neighbor is listening to, the buzz of a fly that's been circling the light in his kitchen for two days now.

"I don't remember my father," he says once the crashing static waves in his mind have . "I don't have any pictures of him so I don't remember him."

"Not even—?"

"Oh, sure, when my mother talks about him or when someone in my hometown says he was a great man, sure I know who they mean. Sometimes I can even imagine what he was like. When I'm asked about my parents I can say he was funny but quiet when it mattered, or that he was serious but always knew what to say. But if no one ever said his name around me, if no one ever asked me about him—I'd never think about him, I'd never talk about him, because there's nothing there to think or talk about."

Jaehwan looks like he wants to say he's sorry, but also like he knows anything he says will ring empty and hollow.

"It's okay," Hongbin smiles around the words, "it really is. It's like a day I don't remember. I'm sure it was nice, but it's gone now and instead of acting like I can get it back I just need to do everything I can to make every day from now on easy to remember."

"Can I help?" Jaehwan asks and that's his way, Hongbin supposes, of asking if he can put his hand on Hongbin's wrist, if he can lean in close towards him, if he can steal his breath from him.

Hongbin replies by kissing him, by biting his bottom lip and pushing him back against the wall that's covered in saturated memories, skies bluer than they are in real life and smiling faces that are frozen in place even as they move against each other, as Jaehwan's knee moves inbetween his legs and he gasps at the friction there.

It's a yes.



From then on it's slow-burning conversations as they walk to his apartment building every night and the doorman never has to let Jaehwan up because Hongbin's always there with him. It's like coming home.



Sometimes Jaehwan sits on the counter in the kitchen while Hongbin makes instant jajangmyeon, Jaehwan talking about the things he's (*they're*) going to do the next day, his heels drumming a steady rhythm against the cupboard below him. And other times he listens to Hongbin talk about the difference between camera lenses, apertures and focal lengths, with his eyes on another unfinished drawing, one he just can't manage to leave alone.

But mostly it's the two of them on his bed, Jaehwan's fingers on every inch of exposed skin he can find, both of them laughing at things that wouldn't be half as funny if they were alone—all of it making Hongbin feel immersed, awash, like a drowning man who's been struggling to reach surface so long that he's only just realized he's perfectly able to breathe right where he is.

He's adapting, he's laying in the grass in the park and closing his eyes without worrying about what might happen to him, he's bringing hundreds of pictures together to create a bigger one, making a thousand individual points in time into a coherent story that begins and ends with a deep lungful of air, the kind you draw in when you realize just how simple it is to be alive.

Jaehwan says things like, "Doesn't your neighbor annoy you with his music playing late at night?"

Hongbin answers, "I don't even hear it when you're with me."

Because Jaehwan's words make the rest of the world melt away, leave the two of them alone, bring them closer to the sky than should be possible, so close that Hongbin thinks he could reach out and take the stars from the sky, but he leaves them where they are because stars are how the passage of time was once counted and calculated, the reason why he knows how many minutes, how many hours have passed since Jaehwan last traced the curve of his spine with his fingers.

And that's important.



There's a night where Jaehwan has other things to do, surprisingly has a life outside of studying Hongbin's profile with his fingers and with his pencils.

It's the first night in weeks that Hongbin has been alone in his apartment with the sky dark outside his window and he sits in the middle of his bed, too used to the feeling of someone sitting next to him to get comfortable alone. He doesn't sleep perfectly with Jaehwan there, but he sleeps *better*, sleeps more.

(With Jaehwan around he forgets about the cut on his hand and the feeling of someone's eyes on the back of his neck, but now he remembers them both violently and spends a half an hour in the bathroom cleaning out the cut as his hands shake, replacing bandages as carefully as he can and trying to ignore the fact that there's something in the corner of his mirror, right *there*, something watching his every move.)

He waits patiently for one in the morning to roll around, for his neighbor to get home and for the muffled, droning music to start up, because it's soothing to him even if, by all accounts, it should be annoying—he just needs the reminder that there's someone else near him, that someone else exists on the sixteenth floor of his apartment building, someone who goes to work and eats instant ramyeon and maybe, just maybe, can't sleep either.

He sits and he waits and his legs start to hurt, an ache in his joints from not moving, but he *waits*.

Two, three, four in the morning and it never comes, it's quiet, and Hongbin can't remember if this has happened before, can't remember if he's made up this routine for someone he barely knows, like his earlier inability to have even realized that Jaehwan must have things he does in the mornings, reasons for leaving before Hongbin wakes up and reasons for not showing up in the park until the middle of the afternoon.

Hongbin never sleeps and the sun rises and another day starts in silence, because time never stops to mourn for lost things—not even the opening notes of a song that was supposed to play but never did.

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Hakyeon is saying, "Plus one, it's you plus one other person, I know you never liked math, but I thought you might like that."

"What is this for again?" Hongbin asks, because he doesn't remember picking up the phone, doesn't remember standing up or walking to his window and pushing the curtains aside, doesn't remember how this day began at all, much less the words Hakyeon said to him a few minutes ago.

And Hakyeon huffs in response, always more than a little put out that anything about him would be forgotten, but he repeats his words (and Hongbin knows he's repeating them from the rushed cadence, the frustrated tone), "Taekwoon is singing at some charity event, he knows a guy who knows a guy—he knows a lot of guys, actually, even though he only leaves our apartment to buy magazines and go to class—but, anyway, he told me to invite you and that you could bring a guest so...you're coming right?"

"You know how I feel about," Hongbin leans his forehead against the glass of the window, looks down on the world below him and wonders how many times he's done this before and how many times he'll do it again, "*things* like that. It sounds nice and of course I'd like to come, but, Hakyeon—"

"But I'll be there," Hakyeon reminds him, "and you can bring your artist friend, I can meet him."

"That sounds like the worst idea anyone's ever had."

"People are always saying things like that to me, but I never agree." Hakyeon pauses and it feels like the whole world pauses in that moment, like Hongbin can't move from where he is, like the breath he's just taken in can't be let go until, "Please, it would mean a lot to me. I've been going to things like this for three years without you and every time I'd think to myself that it would have been better if you'd been there."

Hongbin exhales onto the glass of his window and watches as it clouds up and then quickly recedes, one second of change that ultimately means nothing.

"I'll think about it."

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When Jaehwan draws him he feels like a thousand scattered stars coming together to make a constellation in the night sky. No matter how distant he feels from the earth beneath him he knows that someone can see all the things that make him into the person he is. And while some people might look towards him and see nothing of interest he knows that Jaehwan can see the sweat on the curve of his neck and the bruise on his right elbow that he got the other night.

"It still hurts," he murmurs as Jaehwan runs the lead of his pencil back and forth, back and forth, drawing the line of the bridge of his nose, "I don't mind it, but sometimes you're so..."

"I didn't mean for it to happen." Back and forth, back and forth, the line under the pencil getting heavier and heavier. "But, you have to admit, it's pretty in an ugly sort of way. The changing colors and the way you squirm if I press my fingers to it now. It'll heal eventually, after all. What's a little pain in the meantime when you'll be fine in the end?"

Hongbin presses his lips together, represses the urge to roll onto his side. "True. Do you want to come to a party with me?"

"A party?" The sound of the pencil moving stops and now it's just distant voices and the sounds of a city that Hongbin sometimes forgets is even there.

"It's more like—well, it's a *ga/a*, I guess, but I've been told the name is fancier than the actual

event. My best friend's roommate is singing at it, it has something to do with benefactors and a charity I've never heard of. I don't know all the details, and I don't really want to go, but if you came I'd probably be okay."

"Your best friend? The one who you never see?"

"He's busy, he has class and school and auditions to go to. And anyway he wants to meet you, he'd like to meet you."

"I wouldn't want to get in the way of you and him, your best friend."

"If this is—I've known him my whole life, you know, but somehow...somehow you're still *more* than him, I promise."

Jaehwan doesn't reply for a long moment and then (pencil to paper) band and forth, back and forth, back and, "When is it?"

Hongbin smiles and threads his fingers through grass, feels the world move beneath him, feels at ease.

.

There's a flash and then Hongbin is blinking away the dark spots swimming in his vision and listening to Hakyoon whisper in his ear, "You've never let *me* take a picture with your camera before."

Hongbin smiles, nervously, and doesn't say anything as Jaehwan walks closer to them, handing over the camera as he says, "I think I got a good one, but it probably won't compare to the ones you've been taking all evening or even to the ones you took when you were fourteen."

"Ah, has he showed you all his pictures from back then?" Hakyoon asks, excitedly, and Hongbin takes that conversation starter as a cue to go look for something to drink, because he's never been able to listen to people talk about himself for very long without wanting to sink into the ground.

The people around him are mostly well-off but also mostly kind, he's found, as there's a constant flow of, "Oh, sorry," and, "It's okay," being exchanged between him and others as he makes his way towards the table on the other end of the garden.

At the table he finds Taekwoon who looks uncomfortable in suit and tie as he silently points out one specific bowl of punch, drinking from the glass in his hand.

"You were good," Hongbin tells him, taking a sip from his glass once he's filled it and wincing a

little at the sharp taste of alcohol on the edge of fruitiness of the punch. "I really like your voice. Hakyeon told me—ah, that is, Hakyeon-hyung told me—"

Taekwoon shakes his head, "Just Hakyeon, it's fine."

"If that's—I mean...he said that you were a good singer, but *good* doesn't really do you justice."

"Thank you." Taekwoon smiles over the lip of his glass, like that wasn't something he needed to be told, but he appreciates it anyway. "He said the same about you."

"Oh, in my case he's exaggerating, my voice is nothing special. I could never sing in front of all these people, much less be *asked* to do it. Hakyeon's heard me sing in a backyard on summer nights and he hasn't heard me do it for three years. His memory's probably lacking."

"Perhaps," Taekwoon concedes, "but he did mention you before himself. He was always just a dancer to me, a dancer with a friend who took pictures and sang for him."

Hongbin looks down at the glass in his hand, unsure of how to respond to that and then it comes to him, "Can I take your picture? I never got to when I was staying at your place and I'd really like to have one of you." He neglects to mention that Taekwoon has been a blurry, distant idea in his mind for months now, someone he remembers only because Hakyeon mentions him on occasion, that a picture would change that.

"Just the one?" Taekwoon asks and Hongbin sees it there in the way his eyes look to the side, quickly but not imperceptibly. The reason he likes Taekwoon: they're alike in this small way.

"Just the one," Hongbin confirms and Taekwoon looks over his shoulder before downing the rest of his drink, setting the empty glass on the table, his smile small but genuine.

"Well then, do your worst."

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There are violins playing, low and somber, from where a quartet sits on white wicker chairs, and Hakyeon's hand is tight around his forearm as he drags them past it all, towards the back of the stage where Taekwoon performed earlier.

There's no one else there, just fluttering, forgotten sheet music and some discarded cans of beer, one of which keeps lightly knocking against the wooden stakes holding the stage up, an endless, tinny metronome.

"Who is he?" Hakyeon asks, harshly, not letting go of Hongbin, looking fierce in a way that's almost scary (would be scary if it wasn't *Hakyeon*).

"What—?"

"Who *is* he? Why does he know so much about you?" Hakyeon's fingers are pressing into his skin, his nails are blunt but they hurt anyway. "Why is he telling me to leave you alone? I shouldn't even be asking who he is, it's—who does he *think* he is?"

"I don't—what did—*Jaehwan*?" Hongbin struggles to find words, doesn't know what to say.

"Who else?" Hongbin can hear the violins behind them now, the crescendo and the rapid pace of the song reaching them despite how far they are from everything. "He said you don't need me and I thought he was joking or something, I laughed, but he didn't join me. He just repeated himself and then—I don't know what he was talking about, he was being so *weird*."

"I'm sure there's some kind of misunderstanding," Hongbin says trying to speak as calmly as he can despite the fact that there are tears in the corners of his eyes threatening to fall. "I'm sure he didn't mean—"

Hakyeon lets go of him finally, but it's as if he's been burned, like he can't stand to touch Hongbin any longer.

"Are you standing up for him?" Hakyeon's voice is shakier than it's ever been before. He's always stood tall and still, but he's wavering now right in front of Hongbin's eyes. "I've known you since you were little, I could've—there were so many times when I could've stopped paying attention to you while we were growing up. I could have moved here and forgotten about you, but I didn't."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Hongbin has his hand on his arm and he's going to have another bruise, another mark to remember this day by.

"No, but he—you didn't hear the things he was saying, it was like he knew everything about you and I don't understand—"

"You don't understand *what*?" he asks. "You don't understand how he can know things about me and not have to stop himself from running away?"

"That's not it at all, you aren't listening to me," Hakyeon says and the accusation almost makes Hongbin laugh because he always listens to Hakyeon, has always considered him someone worth listening to, has only ever really had Hakyeon to listen to in the first place.

And he listens now as Hakyeon yells his name, "Hongbin, *Hongbin*," but he doesn't look back at him as he walks away.

The white wicker chairs are empty now, the violins are put away and there's no one to count the time anymore, one two, one two.

Hongbin hasn't sung a single note in three years.

.

Jaehwan doesn't ask what happened, why they left so abruptly and without saying goodbye, but Hongbin tells him anyway, lets it all spill out in-between shaking gasps for air as they take the elevator up to his floor. His words are stuttered and fractured and sometimes they don't come out at all, his face wet with tears no matter how many times he wipes at it with the sleeves of his jacket.

"I've never fought with him before," is what it comes down to. "I've never—we've never had a reason to fight. Even when everyone else got sick of me, of all the terrible things about me, he was always there."

"What terrible things?" Jaehwan asks.

"Isn't it obvious?" Hongbin chokes out. "Everything that could be wrong with me *is*. Or haven't you figured out why I'm alone?"

"I didn't realize you were so alone," Jaehwan answers, "maybe because I'm right here."

The elevator doors slide open and Hongbin stumbles backwards out of them, Jaehwan's hands on him and there's a boy in the hallway there who looks at them with surprise, a tall boy who's eyes are as red as Hongbin's feel and he almost says something, says *are you looking for someone* but Jaehwan's hands are still on him and he can't ignore it.

It's easier to ignore the boy.

And it's easier to completely forget about the boy when the door to his apartment closes behind them and Jaehwan kisses him like nothing has ever mattered as much.

If Hongbin had to describe it he'd say it's like a prayer, like worship, the way Jaehwan touches him and it makes him feel worthy of the attention. When Jaehwan touches the jut of his hipbone, traces it like he might onto a page, Hongbin feels every other part of the world fall away, hidden behind the touch of skin on skin, nothing between them.

Because when Jaehwan says, "Just like that, don't move, stay right there," when they're fucking it means the same thing it does when he says it in the park: *you look beautiful like this*.

And Hongbin stays as best he can, does what he's told and hopes it's enough with hands full of

sheets like grass beneath him, the sweat on his neck feeling the same as it does in the late afternoon and his ceiling like clouds above—a thousand different shapes that look different every time he blinks.

He wishes Jaehwan wouldn't press his fingers into bruises, but he lets him because any touch is better than none at all.

He says, "Jaehwan, Jaehwan, oh, I know I'm not good enough, n-not really, but—"

Jaehwan shakes his head, "No, no, don't say that, you're perfect. I know you can't take pictures of words, but I want you to remember that one: *perfect*, remember every letter of it, every consonant and vowel. And if you can't that's okay because I'll say it to you again and again, as many times as it takes, so you'll never forget. It's just you and me from now on, just pictures of me and you, okay?"

Hongbin responds with a nod and a slow kiss, a *please don't go* kiss with a whine in the back of his throat as Jaehwan's hand touches his cock, finally, finally.

There's nothing else he can do, he can't say *no* now—he doesn't have anything else.

.

At first he thinks the tapping is a sound from outside, a sound from the city that has somehow crept in despite the windows of his apartment always being shut as tight as they can be.

He hears it on a night when he's alone and he can't be entirely sure it wasn't there before that night because for all he knows it was and he just hasn't been able to hear it until now. But he *does* hear it now, the incessant background noise from his restless mind made real.

When he realizes that it's coming from inside his apartment he checks all the faucets thinking that maybe there are reclusive drops of water that are falling heavily on the stainless steel of the bottom of a sink, but there's nothing. There's no rattling coming from the air conditioning and no one outside his door when he looks out through the peephole.

But there's still the tapping sound and it never slows down, not even intermittently. It just goes on and on with only a heavy, hanging pause in-between each individual tap and he counts the seconds there and it's always the same—*four*.

Always: *tap* (one, two, three, four—), *tap* (one, two, three, four—), *tap* (one, two, three, four—), *tap* (one, two, three, four—).

And, after a certain point, after an hour or maybe two, it starts to feel like a game, like someone's playing with him.



It starts to feel like it's not something random or happenstance, but rather like there's someone watching him and doing this *to* him.

If he calls Hakyeon he knows he'll be told he's being irrational. "It isn't something that's happening to you," Hakyeon has told him before about things like this, "it's just something that's happening around you."

Maybe, Hongbin thinks, the palms of his hands pressed flat against his ears, Hakyeon didn't quite understand him as well as he thought he did.

The tapping stops around four in the morning, suddenly and abruptly, leaving him waiting and counting in a silence that is more pronounced than any he's ever experienced before in his life. It takes him a while to stop and he reaches over a hundred before he does, convinced the sound is going to come back to him. He's on edge for the rest of the morning, even as the sun rises and his room is gilded in a rosy glow, the type that usually eases him to sleep after a long night of going without it.

He wants to cry and so he does, hands shaking on his knees as he sits on the edge of his bed, undone because of a noise, a bump in the night that was probably nothing at all.

The cut on his hand throbs and it should have healed by now, it's had a month to close up and scab over and become nothing more than a mark, but it still bleeds and looks angry and is *there* no matter how tightly he wraps a cloth bandage around it.

He can feel himself falling apart at the seams and, to think, he thought the threads there were so tightly held in place only a week ago.

.

"Can we do something else?"

"What do you mean?"

Jaehwan looks over at him from where he has his supplies spread out, everything set in neat little rows. It makes Hongbin feel bad, he should have said something fifteen minutes ago, but he's been unable to think straight for hours now, has been struggling with finding the right words to say and the order in which to say them in.

"I'm just," he presses his index and middle fingers of each hand against his eyes, "so *tired*, hyung. In more ways than one. Can't we—I don't know—I don't know *what* we could do, just anything else. For one day."

"If you're tired maybe you should go home," Jaehwan says, slowly, a few bright Copic markers in his hands, the caps still on tight.

"No," Hongbin's voice is harsh and sharp and unlike him and he knows it by the way Jaehwan's eyes widen, his lips parting slightly in surprise. It causes him to fold in on himself, to pull back and draw his legs up to his chest, protecting himself from he doesn't know what. "No, I'm sorry, but I don't want to. I couldn't sleep last night, there were these noises and I'm scared if I go back—well, I'm just scared. But I thought maybe we could go to your place."

"I don't know." Jaehwan sets the markers down one-by-one, lines them up and pushes them into place, reds and blues and greens. "There's always something going on in my building, some kind of problem. Right now our water pressure is messed up."

"Are you embarrassed that it's not as nice as where I live?" Hongbin asks, his arms around his legs now and his cheek pressed to his knee, speaking softly as he watches Jaehwan's hands freeze where they are. "Because, you know, I probably wouldn't even be able to afford where *you* live if I was paying for it on my own. I get it, and I think—I think you're probably better than me, honestly. You don't rely on other people."

Jaehwan keeps his eyes on his rows of markers and pencils and pastel chalks and he says, "Do you even know that, though?"

"I-I don't—"

"Do you even know that I don't rely on other people?" he asks. "Or are you just assuming I don't because no one pays for a high rise apartment for me?"

"No, that's not—it's just that you've never mentioned—"

"It's okay," Jaehwan shrugs, "I understand. And, anyway, you're right. No one pays for anything for me. My apartment is small and I don't like to be there, that's why I come here." A breeze blows, calm and nonthreatening, and it flips the pages of Jaehwan's open sketchbook, but he doesn't pay it any attention. "That's why I draw you and go to your apartment instead of inviting you back to mine."

"Okay," Hongbin says, voice small, voice shaking. "Okay, that's fine, this is fine, we can just do what we usually do. I don't mind."

Jaehwan smiles at him, warm and genuine.

(But it inspires nothing in him, it makes him feel more nervous than anything, and for the first time since he met him he finds himself wondering if Jaehwan is really someone he should trust—and realizing that if he's not there's nothing he can do about it.)

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With Jaehwan next to him that night there are no noises besides soft snuffling sounds of sleep, the steady inhale and exhale of Jaehwan breathing against his ear, and he sleeps restlessly but he still *sleeps*, so he'll take it.

If this is all he can get, he'll take it.

.

He doesn't tell Jaehwan about Sanghyuk and he isn't sure why.

He tries to at one point, tries to say *you know that boy we see some nights, the tall boy*, but the words won't leave his lips and instead what comes out is, "Please, I need you," which is true in a way that he wishes it wasn't.

Because he needs Jaehwan, needs him like mosquitos need blood to fill them up before they die at the end of a long day. He needs him to tell him everything's going to be okay even though Hongbin knows it's Jaehwan who's taking him apart, piece by piece, Jaehwan who's destroying him—he needs it because or else he's dying in slow agony, listening to noises that aren't there.

There's a long silence from Jaehwan's end, a whine over the phone line before he replies, "Alright, it'll be a little bit, but alright, I'll be there."

And Hongbin is sick to his stomach, is sick at the way his head floods with relief, because people drown in floods and that sounds *nice* to him, the idea of letting go underwater, so he does.

He lets go, he drifts, and Jaehwan brings him back to shore every time, even when he's long past wanting to be saved.



His camera is covered in dust and he runs his fingers over the top of it and tries to remember *why*, tries to remember the last time he took a picture but *can't*.

He does remember, oddly, learning what dust was, maybe because it disgusts him, because it's dead things and forgotten things, it's him floating through the air. It's all the ugliness of the world and it coats things that he can't get rid of no matter how much he wants to. It shows when he touches those things and it reminds him how badly he's doing, how much he's neglected things, sitting on top of dressers and counter tops.

Dead skin cells and animal hairs and tiny little fibers that mix together to make it obvious that he's not functioning as well as he should be.

And his camera is covered in it, the one thing he's always kept in his hands and it's covered in dust, the one thing he's always managed to remember and he's forgotten about it.

He has to check his phone to find out the date and when he sees that it's early July he drops it to the floor like an arsonist might drop a matchstick with trembling hands onto a puddle of gasoline.

Oxygen is necessary for a fire, he breathes in, without it a fire won't last, he breathes out.

He tries to think of when it was he moved here, of how long it's been—but the date eludes him. Warm weather, warm enough to go to the park on days where it wasn't raining, but he's not even sure there were ever any rainy days.

Scrambling he pulls boxes upon boxes out from under his bed, he pulls out files full of developed pictures and he sighs, relieved, as he flips over the first one he finds of his apartment building (corners and stairwells and the inside of the elevator, the cupboards in his kitchen) and sees the date on the back.

*March*, he thinks, so it hasn't even been half a year. But his hands shake as he finds that his pictures peter out after March, April, May. June is lost to him, is a blank. Timestamps on his camera show that he didn't take one picture the whole month unless he deleted them, and he can't be sure that he didn't do that.

A whole month, just like that, *gone*.

It's not the first time, not by a long shot. There were weeks and months, a whole year he wanted to forget once, but he's always come away from those with the satisfied feeling that he *wanted* those memories to be gone. He's always had—had—*had* (he pushes back to March, to pictures of the boy who's been his best friend since he was too young to understand what friendship really was) Hakyeon, yes.

He's always had *Hakyeon* at his elbow, unwittingly reminding him of things, so even if he's purged things out of his mind at large he's known irrelevant details and unimportant moments.

But this time, there's nothing.

There's Jaehwan standing in front of him, back to him, shadow cast even though he's as insubstantial as smoke.

Jaehwan is the only thing Hongbin can count on, and he's not even sure that he's real.



When Jaehwan draws him he feels himself changing under his fingertips.

It's not just when Jaehwan draws him anymore, though. The art isn't important, not at this point. He feels it, always, Jaehwan's fingers on his skin, pushing and pulling and changing his shape. The sharp point of Jaehwan's pencil casting shadows over his face, darkening the circles around his eyes. The colors of Jaehwan's pastels travelling over the the tops of his cheeks, coloring them with embarrassment and nervousness.

He wants to tell him to stop sometimes, but he never does.

After all it's Jaehwan (only Jaehwan) who coaxes these things out of him. Quiet words and quieter still sounds.

It's Jaehwan who he can say, "I don't like you," to and only get a smile in response.

He's started to tell him these things, is a weird mixture of terrified and confident around

Jaehwan, so he says things like, "I don't want to be here," when they sit in the park with the sun out and their skin slick with sweat, the dissonance of the atmosphere in the air and the atmosphere in Hongbin's own head.

Goosebumps on his skin in ninety degree weather and Jaehwan replies, "Yet here you are," pressing his pencil to paper hard enough to bruise Hongbin's skin.

Sometimes, though, he's not even sure if Jaehwan hears him, he's not sure if he really says those things out loud or if he just imagines it, thinks about it, wishes he had the guts (because he doesn't, he pulled them all out one night, left them on the floor, stinking, rotting, nothing inside).

Maybe he just keeps quiet and watches Jaehwan work, a model with no thoughts of his own. Maybe he sits there and doesn't say a word.

He has no way of knowing, has no pictures of the moments to look at later on, but Jaehwan said, once, that his memory wasn't really bad it was just that—what was it—just that he *takes special care to remember things most people would never think about again*.

So, if that's the case, then perhaps it's just a matter of him remembering things wrong, the way he's heard a lot of people do. How a group of people can recount a day they spent together and all remember it differently based on personal perspective and bias, which would mean, would mean, would mean—

Would mean he's *normal*.

He tells Jaehwan, this (possibly, maybe), says, "What if it's just that I remember things no one else does and that they remember the things I don't, that together we have a full memory between us every time?"

And Jaehwan says nothing, doesn't look up, head bent to get closer to the paper propped up on his knees, and that's just how Jaehwan is when he's drawing, Hongbin thinks—unless it's not.



It's almost worse when it's quiet.

A night alone with no noises in the back of his mind is startling and he flinches every time the walls around him settle, every time he hears a door slam down the hallway, not used to all the sounds he should be used to by now because he's used to sounds that aren't normal at all.

Around one in the morning he finds himself laying on his side in bed, scrolling through the contacts in his phone trying to find a missing number, trying to see if it's hidden somewhere, if his best friend somehow fell through the cracks, if he can pull him back up. Instead he finds himself staring at the name *Wonshik*, staring and then calling.

He's not sure why he does it, except that he's been thinking about doing it over the past few days (or has it been weeks), thinking about it ever since he invited Sanghyuk into his apartment and watched him try not to cry. He's thought about it and felt like he owes it to the younger, taller boy to at least try, even if what he's trying is almost sure to yield nothing as a result.

At first he thinks there's an echo: the ringtone coming from his phone times two, something wrong with the speakers, but then he realizes that's not it at all—it's that he can hear the actual ringing of the phone he's calling, the noise coming through the wall next to his bed, a millisecond out of sync with the sound against his ear.

He lays there, frozen, listening to the default ringtone of a phone that shouldn't be in the apartment next to his, not anymore.

It ends after ten rings that he counts while holding his breath, not letting go, and then he hears the very beginning of the voicemail (*Hello, this is—*) before he hangs up and pushes his phone away, moves backwards on his bed, wrapping his arms around himself and staring forward at the dark blue wall, covered in pictures of people he hasn't seen in months.

He wonders, if he were to tear those pictures down, tear the wall down—what would he find?

He imagines skin as pale as moonlight in some places, purple and bruised in others, maybe peeling away, maybe being eaten alive the way dead things always are. He's never seen a dead body before, but he can imagine it, in terrible detail, worse than it probably would be but still knowing that imagining it can't even come close.

There's a sickness in his stomach that never leaves, he's just used to it by now.



Jaehwan goes to get ice cream one afternoon and Hongbin knows what flavor he'll come back with: deep, creamy chocolate that he'll eat all of, even the melted parts left at the bottom of the styrofoam cup, so it will color his kisses sweetly for the rest of the night.

Hongbin pulls the sketchbook towards him while he's gone and flips backwards through the pages with an urgency he doesn't understand.

Every page has a date in the bottom right-hand corner and he uses them to count time. He goes slowest through June, trying to see if there's something off about it, but all he sees is that extra care has been given to make him look exhausted in drawings from the sixth month. So he spent June tired, it's nothing new and hardly surprising.

What he does come to notice is that in almost every picture his right hand is visible along with the bandages on it. Even when it seems unlikely that he was holding his hand in certain positions for hours at a time he finds it drawn that way and it strikes him as odd. Jaehwan has never specifically asked him to pose in such a way that draws attention to that hand, but it almost seems to be the focus of every other drawing, like some sort of sick fascination with the injury there.

In May he looks sad, but resigned, and he understands the feelings even if he isn't quite sure why they're there. There are some days where his smile seems brighter than others, but he thinks that it's likely that Jaehwan embellished his expression in those instances and, he supposes, who is he to deny someone their artistic liberties?

But in the very early days of May, in all of April, the happiness is genuine and it hurts him in a surprising way.

He knows his smiles then were true, because they look in the drawings the way they do in pictures—the real thing, not a copy of it. He wishes all his smiles were as genuine as the ones he sees documented over the end of spring: lips parted to show white teeth, dimples in his cheeks, eyes almost closed from how wide the smile is spread across his face, like flowers blooming under the tender care of an attentive gardener.



He flips quickly through those pages because although he was happy in them it only serves to remind him how much that has changed, only juxtaposes how he feels now. Really, it's like looking at a photograph with inverted colors, it looks inherently wrong.

But it's not like that at all, because happiness shouldn't be wrong, shouldn't be as startling and strange as it is.

He recognizes the first drawing in the sketchbook as soon as he gets to it (though it isn't actually the first, there are dangling pieces of paper clinging to the spirals at the top that must be from pages that were ripped out), a drawing that doesn't quite look like him, though obviously is *of* him. It's less detailed than all the others and, to think, it could have been the only picture of him that Jaehwan ever drew if he'd been able to say *no* to him in the beginning.

Something confuses him about the picture, though, and he drags a finger along one particular part of it, brow furrowed and mouth set in a frown.

He doesn't even notice Jaehwan until he hears, "That first drawing was so bad," and turns to see him sitting next to him with a small smile on his face, styrofoam cup in hand.

He stares for a long moment before asking, "What's this?"

"Hm?" Jaehwan leans over him and looks at where he's pointing, the palm of his right hand as drawn on the first day they met. "Oh, your scar?"

"My what?"

"Your scar." Jaehwan leans back and blinks at him, that smile still there even though Hongbin sees no reason for it to be. "The one on your hand. You never used to cover it up...or at least you didn't that day. I've always wondered about it, actually, but I've never wanted to ask and you've never explained it."

"I don't have a scar," Hongbin says, slowly.

Jaehwan's smile turns into pouting lips around a spoonful of ice cream, his eyes searching for an imperceptible half second. "Yes you do. I wouldn't have drawn you with one if you didn't. It was shiny, like a burn scar, and pink. It's not a big deal, you don't have to pretend like you don't have it, we all have things like that."

"But I don't have a scar," Hongbin repeats, insistent, his voice louder this time, his head swimming in words, in confusion, in the sounds around them that are too *much* for him to

stand. "I never—"

He falls silent and Jaehwan watches him, smiling again, plastic red spoon in his hand.

"Never what?"

"Nothing, I—forget about it."

"It sure seems like you have," Jaehwan murmurs, but when Hongbin looks towards him sharply he sees nothing to indicate that he even spoke and suddenly he isn't sure if the words came from Jaehwan or if he thought them himself, isn't sure that if he pulled the bandages away from his hand he wouldn't find a scar there, shiny and pink.



When he does check, later, he finds an infected wound, not so much bleeding anymore as it is oozing, but still *open* and he presses his fingers against it, makes it hurt and gasps in pain, does everything he can to prove to himself that it's there—and still feels unsure, still doubts himself, still *wonders*.



There's a name on the edge of his mind one night, a smile that he can't fit to a face.

He goes through pictures for hours and does it all while listening to the sound of things coming from the apartment next door. It's almost annoying at this point and he feels bad for thinking it, the same feeling of guilt he used to get when he'd kick away stray cats from the back porch on days where he felt his worst. But at this point he's sure he's imagining it, that even if the crying and snapping noises were real at some point they aren't anymore.

But the more pressing matter is the calming, warming presence that he misses more than

anything but that he can't *name* for some reason, like a word he knows he learned years and years ago but that eludes him even so.

It's an actual name, he knows it, knows that there's a person who he's forgotten and knows that they're important, unlike kids in classrooms where he never felt welcome and old, shuffling neighbors who always looked at him distrustfully. This person matters and he knows it because he knows there are pictures missing, lots of them, and anyone who he took pictures of was someone—*is* someone—who mattered.

He can see them on the edge of his vision, tan skin and long neck and small, empathetic smile, but no facial features beyond that, no memories, no idea what to call them. And he says all sorts of names out loud, names from the dramas his mother used to watch and names of famous people and names he just knows the way you know some things. But nothing sparks anything in him and, worst of all, he's not sure that even if he stumbled upon the right name he would recognize it anyway.

Finally, finally, he finds a picture in the back of one file, a tall singer with an intense gaze and he says, "Taekwoon," and it's not *right* but it's close and a few pictures after that he finds what he was looking for: a picture he didn't take, but there he is and he almost cries at the sight.

"Hakyeon," he whispers, "I'm so sorry, please forgive me. Never again, never again."

And Hakyeon's number isn't in his phone, not anymore, but Taekwoon's *is* and he calls it without hesitation, because he needs to fix things now.

Taekwoon answers his phone with a quiet, worried tone, says, "Hello?"

Hongbin answers, "Taekwoon-hyung, it's me, Hongbin. I'm Hakyeon's friend, I-I'm sorry to call this late, but—"

"Do you know where he is?" Taekwoon interrupts, and it's so unlike him to do so, to even try to be heard over someone else, that Hongbin is stunned into silence. "Is that why you're calling?"

"No, I—*what?*"

Taekwoon doesn't say anything in response, thought Hongbin can hear him breathing, shakily.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hongbin offers, though he knows it isn't much, like

giving pennies to an offering and expecting good fortune in return. "I'm sorry, I just—I somehow deleted his number out of my phone and I have a terrible memory for those sorts of things. So I thought if I called *you* that you might be able to help."

It takes Taekwoon another minute to say, "He's missing."

The words make Hongbin tighten his hold on the photograph in his hand, the one he hasn't let go of since he found it, Hakyeon with his arm around him, just like always, the last time they saw each other.

"Missing?"

"That's what the police say," and Hongbin thinks of Sanghyuk at that, of Wonshik, of the quiet crying in the very back of his mind, of a ringing phone, "but they don't know him. They think maybe he went somewhere without telling me, but why would he do that?"

"He wouldn't," Hongbin answers, even though he knows Taekwoon doesn't need him to.

He can't see Taekwoon nodding but he knows that's what he's doing and it makes him sad, makes him realize all the things he's missed out on. Quiet little moments and the pictures of them. He could have visited Hakyeon's apartment instead of the park, could have cleaned the rooms there and eaten more helpings of Taekwoon's tangsuyuk.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"For what?" Taekwoon asks.

And even though Hongbin wants to say *everything* he finds that he can't.



Walking home with Jaehwan he stays a few steps behind him at every turn, watching the way he moves and trying to find something wrong with it, like a subtle glitch in a program that's caused the whole thing to go haywire. But Jaehwan strides along in front of him with an ease that's always made him jealous. Even now when he finds himself saying, "Why don't we ever go to your apartment?"

Jaehwan turns and lifts an eyebrow as if Hongbin just spoke in a language he doesn't understand, replying with, "What do you mean?"

"I *mean*," Hongbin stresses the word, because he's so sick of this, of word games and being treated like some small child who needs to be protected, "why do we always come back to my place? And don't tell me it's because the wiring is bad in your building or that the plumbing is messed up. Those are all just excuses. I want to know *why*."

"Okay, you're not making any sense," Jaehwan stops and Hongbin nearly runs into him, stops himself just in time as he hears Jaehwan continue with, "I'd be happy to answer your question if we hadn't gone to my apartment at least a dozen times in the last month."

"What? But, I swear—"

"If you don't remember, it's fine," Jaehwan says, voice sweet like cake topped with too much icing, the type that makes you sick to your stomach by the end of it, reaching out and touching Hongbin's wrist, making him nearly jump backwards. "In fact, it doesn't matter to me, we can go tonight, whatever you want."

"Whatever I want?" Hongbin laughs, not quite believing the words, but Jaehwan just nods and everything seems to be off by one degree, a slight change that somehow makes the entire world feel like it's off its axis.

"Just follow me, everything will be okay," Jaehwan makes a turn in a different direction than usual and Hongbin knows he shouldn't, but he follows him anyway.

There's still something in him, despite everything else, that wants Jaehwan to be right, that wants everything to be okay.



Jaehwan's apartment is normal, if a bit small. It has lights that flicker every so often and there are neighbors who yell and have their televisions on a volume so loud that it shakes the walls, makes the foundation of the building buzz.

There are sketchbooks everywhere. Jaehwan has to move some so that there's somewhere for them to sit down and he does it so kindly that Hongbin forgets not to smile softly at him and gets a smile in return.

(When did he stop doing that? When did he stop smiling at Jaehwan? Or did he just stop *smiling*?)

"It's nothing special," Jaehwan shrugs. "I could almost see *why* you wouldn't remember coming here."

"That's not how it works," Hongbin tells him, carefully watching for Jaehwan's reaction to whatever he says. It seems imperative, now, that he doesn't turn away and miss anything. That's when the bad things creep out of the shadows, when you close your eyes and pretend they aren't there.

But Jaehwan just says, "How does it work?" His hands are on his knees and he seems genuine in a way that almost disgusts Hongbin, because he's not *allowed* to be this way, not after everything that's happened. He can't just flip a switch now and be interested, be the guy Hongbin met in the park who just wanted to capture him in one single drawing, nothing more.

"I don't know, exactly, but not like that," Hongbin amends and Jaehwan licks his lips, sighs in a way that makes Hongbin nervous, though probably needlessly so. "It's not like I just forget inane things or boring events in my life. I mean, I almost—" he pauses, takes in a shaky breath "—I almost forgot Hakyeon, and he's neither of those things."

"Hakyeon?" And there it is (or is it?) the quick look up, the hard eyes, something dangerous right there. "Have you talked to him lately? Did you two make up?"

"No." Hongbin watches Jaehwan closer than he's ever watched anyone before. "His roommate says—well, he says the police say he's missing."

Jaehwan doesn't so much as flinch, he almost relaxes at the words, falling back on the couch as he says, "Really? That's awful."

"You don't sound like you think it's awful," Hongbin murmurs. "My neighbor, the one next door, he's missing too, you know, and it's funny I—"

"Well, this is a big city," Jaehwan interrupts, sitting up straight again. "Things happen, and I really do think it's awful, but I don't think it helps anyone to dwell on things."

"He's my best friend, though," Hongbin says and suddenly he's hurt and his head is throbbing and he's not sure why. He can feel his pulse running through him, faster than usual, louder than ever, and he's on edge, precariously so. "He's my best friend and he's *missing*."

"And I'm *sorry*," Jaehwan replies, and Hongbin would have to flip a coin to decide whether he sounds sincere or not, "but I can't do anything about it. For now all I can do is spend time with you, if that's what you want. Is that what you want?"

Hongbin stares at him, blankly and after a few moments Jaehwan sighs and stands up.

"I'm going to make something for dinner. Something instant, probably, if that sounds good to you."

Hongbin watches him head for the kitchen and he feels detached from the whole thing, from the situation and from himself. He feels as if he's watching this play out, with no control over the circumstances, no control over his own body as he reaches forward and takes one of the sketchbooks off of the coffee table that's set in front of him.

Inside of it are—drawings of himself.

But they aren't like the ones from the park. None of them are of him posing and a lot of them are of him from a distance. Many of them are of him sitting on a bench that he still thinks of as his own when he passes it, the supplies from his camera bag all spread out beside him.

He drops the sketchbook and reaches for another.

More pictures of him, this one has a lot of him sleeping, the curve of his back and the blue veins of his eyelids.

Another.

He's not even surprised anymore, he just leafs through and looks at drawings of him in the park, drawings of him in places he doesn't remember going to, drawings of him—he freezes as he notices a stack of papers on the floor, halfway under the coffee table.

He leans down and grabs at them, pulls them closer.

The one on the top is of an airport, a huge, spacious place with sunlight streaming in through glass-plated walls.

It's of him in an airport, him on his first day here.

And suddenly he realizes that there's a reason for every time he's felt an invisible pair of eyes on the back of his neck, that there's a reason why he never feels those stares when he's with Jaehwan, that the reason for those two things is one and the same.

It's because monsters are most dangerous when they make you think they're the ones keeping you safe.

"Hongbin?" he looks up to see Jaehwan wiping his hands on a towel, his face perplexed, the smell of instant jajangmyeon in the air. "What are you doing?"

It's that question that sparks something in him, that makes him *snap* like a firecracker in the hands of a small child right before it goes off.

"How long?" he asks.

"What?"

"How long have you been following me?"

Jaehwan's mouth falls open and he tilts his head to the side (he smiles for half a second, then hides it quickly and it can't be that Hongbin is imagining it, no, *no*, it was there), says, "Look, I know I drew some pictures of you in the park before I asked if it was okay, but I didn't mean for it to be weird. It was just sort of anatomy study, I do it with a lot of people."

"These are *all* of me," Hongbin accuses, lifting up one of the sketchbooks and throwing it down so it lands on the hardwood floor with a heavy *thwap*.

"Well, yes, I kind of noticed that myself which was why—"

"How did you see me at the airport?" Hongbin interrupts, and he's yelling now, he sees Jaehwan move forward and he moves back, doesn't miss the way Jaehwan's eyes go wide, because he knows that look.

"Airport?" Jaehwan says the word cautiously, like it might cause an explosion.

It very nearly does.

"You know what I mean." Hongbin points at the pictures, still in a stack on the floor and



Jaehwan glances over at them, then back at him, looking worried—and Hongbin doesn't even let himself pretend it's worry for him, he knows Jaehwan is worried for himself now.

"Hongbin, there's nothing—"

"I know what I saw!" Hongbin presses his hands to his ears and shakes his head, not listening, he's not listening, not anymore, he's *done* listening. "I've felt it, too, and I thought you were saving me, but it was—it was *you* the whole time."

"Hongbin," Jaehwan is talking clearly, is holding a hand out, "listen to me. I knew this was a bad idea, I always kind of thought you were—look, just come with me, okay?"

"Why would I go anywhere with you?" Hongbin spits out the words, watches the whole world slide sideways as he stands with his back to the wall. "Where could I even go—oh *god*—that you wouldn't just follow me to anyway?"

"We can get you some help," Jaehwan says, softly, and that's what pushes Hongbin off the edge, that's what causes him to lose the hold he had on the very edge of the world beneath him.

"Help?" he repeats and he sees it, sitting on the front table right next to where he's standing, the long, rectangular box that Jaehwan always has with him, with its heavy dark plastic that feels cold under his hands, that causes Jaehwan to back away from him now, that, when it hits the side of Jaehwan's skull, makes a loud *snap* that echoes through the air around them.

(At first he thinks it's the plastic of the box that's broken, but he realizes, later, that it was the bone and he thinks *so that's what the snapping sound was.*)

The first hit is easy, fueled by adrenaline, the second hit is harder, but more satisfying and after that he loses count, just again and again and again.

He feels the blood spatter backwards onto his face and his forearms, watches it land on blank sheets of paper on the floor by the coffee table. It's warm on him, like the rays of the sun, like Jaehwan's fingers on his skin in the dead of the night.

Jaehwan has always been like a sunset, so ordinary that Hongbin would never have looked at him twice before he had a reason to—and now he's all the colors of the night sky, purple fading into black and blue, the dark red of a storm on the horizon: a warning.

He doesn't feel sick until he sees the brain matter. It's just a little bit, but he sees it, pink in

some places and colored red in others, and that's what makes him sick more than the blood and more than the bone and more than the side of Jaehwan's face that's caved in now, unrecognizable, a thing instead of a person.

That's what makes him stop.

That's what makes him *run*.



He runs and he runs and he runs.

The sky is dark he doesn't know what's lurking up there so he doesn't look up he just *runs*.

He stops at one point, in an alleyway between two buildings that stretch up and up endlessly and he leans over and vomits, imagines every bad thing pouring out of him, every feeling and every thought, every memory that's ever made him want to fall to the ground and give up.

He lets go of the things he's let himself remember for far too long, the things that sit at the very back of his mind and haunt him like ghosts might, like ghosts do.

There's the smell of a gasoline around him and inside him, a freshly lit match falling from his fingers, the meaty part of his palm catching on something metal and burning hot. There's his mother crying alone in her bedroom over the pictures of a man she loved more than life itself. There's everyone he ever knew turning their backs to him, calling him names and spreading rumors and, worst of all, pretending he isn't there at all.

There's his hands shaking as they drop a long, rectangular box full of art supplies into the dumpster before he turns and starts to run again.



His apartment is silent and his own heartbeat echoes in his ears, erratic and out of control and he can't calm it down.

He rifles through files and starts to tear things apart, he walks from wall to wall and rips down the pictures that hang there—every single one. He drops them all into his metal trash can, rips them up before he does so, tearing into memories, his chest heaving and his entire body covered in sweat.

It's almost too easy to destroy the things he cares about, to get rid of blue summer skies and his sisters' smiling faces, to tear every single picture in half that he has of the green grass of the park that's only a five minute walk from his apartment building.

(All of them except one, a picture that he very carefully leans against a stack of notebooks on the desk across from his bed.)

He finds the matches beneath the kitchen sink, neatly and innocently placed out of sight and it takes a few tries to get one to catch against the side of the box in his hands, but he does it finally and the flame flickers in front of him, coloring the edges of his vision with a warm glow. When he drops it in his whole world goes up in flames.

There's nothing left to him besides the instinct to open his window and push the trash can closer, to let the fire die out once it's done what he needs it to do, to breathe in and out as he upends it all out his window and watches nothing but ash drift downwards without a thought in his mind, without a word from his lips.

He feels like a drawing that's been erased, like something that used to be but isn't anymore.

There's the sound of static in the back of his mind and it grows and grows, it crashes into him like the waves of the ocean, cold and merciless, pulling him underneath.

And it's so far away, but the last thing he sees before he closes his eyes is the rising sun and he thinks to himself that, despite everything, the world is a very beautiful place.



It's like the start of a film, a sudden beginning: his eyes are wide open, his lips are parted, his body is sore, and the ceiling above him is startlingly clean and white. The air around him is heavy and cloying, is full of the distant sounds of a summer afternoon.

There's a memory in the back of his mind, something he can't fool himself into thinking was a dream, and it's fading away from him already but he grabs at it desperately, at the dull edges and the cloudy middle, none of it giving him anything concrete to hold onto. It hurts him to remember, makes him shake a little to think about what he was doing and it was—*running*.

It was running. Running like something (*someone*) was behind him, chasing him, but he was too scared to look back and see what it was, see if it was anything at all. He thinks that the reason he was running is more important than whatever it was he was running from, that if he could just remember that one thing it would cause everything to fall into place, but it's no use.

His room is comforting in its familiarity—the dark blue walls remind him of the beginnings of a warm summer evening, like all the times he ever sat on the steps near his childhood home and thought about his future, about all the things he had to look forward to—and he sits up so he can focus on the pictures he has hanging up, the ones in frames and the ones affixed to the walls with pins and tape alike.

It takes him a minute to realize that none of the things he's looking for are there. Instead there is a distinct absence, there are blank walls, there is a box at the side of his bed that is empty when he leans over and peers inside of it. He feels hollow.

There is absolutely nothing to tell him where he has been or what has happened to him and his head is full of static like a television station with no signal, broken and lost and being watched by one lonely person who's just waiting for something to break through, for the broadcast to start again—but there's nothing.

Except—he thinks he's seeing things for a moment but he's *not*—there is something, he realizes as he blinks away tears, a picture he's never seen, set gently and carefully, leaned up against a stack of notebooks, too far away for him to see the contents of from where he's propped himself up on his elbows in bed.

He gets up and it's not easy. He still feels weak and sick to his stomach (more than he rightfully should, more than it makes sense for him to, and he can't figure out why). He sits on the edge of his bed for a long minute, watching the clock at his bedside the whole time, counting the seconds as if he has a reason to.

When he stands he almost comes crashing down, almost falls to the floor, a headache slamming into him like he imagines a train might, and he's imagined that before, imagined the one step he would have to take—but it subsides after a minute, leaves him as quickly as it came and he takes the next few steps without problem.

His hands shake as they pick up the picture, but he's used to that sort of thing, used to having to steady the things he holds with pursed lips and narrowed eyes, concentrating as best as he can on the one thing left that might tell him what this all means.

It's a picture of him and...*Hakyeon* and for a moment the sight sets his heart at ease, Hakyeon's arm around his shoulder and an easy smile on his face, until he realizes he has no recollection of taking the picture.

The hanging lights in the background look like stars and the trees around them are so green, so crisp, the smile on his face is so real—he didn't take this picture, but he loves the person who did, at least in the moment, in the single second that it took for them to point and click, he loved them.

But he's never seen the picture in his life, he's never been to a place where the whole of the world looks like it's shining.

He turns and sees, for the first time, that his window is wide open, that a breeze is blowing the white, sheer curtains there.

He's covered in sweat and it's the middle of summer, but he feels cold all over.

He's never been in love.

*end*