

Me In You

Matt slammed the front door on his way out. His skin was on fire, anger simmering just below the surface. It was an itch he knew well, the kind that you just can't reach well enough to scratch. It was a frequent affliction that had become more intense as the years had passed.

He could still hear the yelling, even when he was halfway down the walkway. He glanced over in his neighbor's direction. The old lady stood there, watering her roses on her side of the white picket fence, shaking her head in disapproval. Even that deaf old bat could hear the ruckus from inside his house.

"... teach your son some fuckin' respect! Next time he mouths off, I'mma knock his ass out..."

His father's angry voice carried so much better than his mom's, but he knew the woman was petitioning on his behalf like Mother Mary incarnate. Matt should probably have felt guilty and maybe some sort of gratitude toward his mother, but he just couldn't bring himself to feel anything other than pissed off and disappointed.

It had been five years since Matt's life had been turned upside down. Growing up, he had always been a 'good boy.' He'd attended Sunday School regularly, participated in church activities, and even played Joseph in the Nativity play three years in a row. All of that changed his last year of Middle School. At first, he'd hated having to lie when the pastor shook his hand and asked him how he was doing, but somehow 'I notice boys in the locker room' just didn't seem appropriate. For two years, Matt prayed for God to take away his 'impure thoughts', as the pastor would refer to them. However, the pastor had different sermons meant for his brand of lust, the kind that involved Hellfire and eternal damnation.

Then, three years ago, his father's usual glass of wine slowly turned into several beers on Friday nights. The man had taken a new position at work. The money was better, but he seemed more irritable and stressed when he got home in the evenings. He'd get wasted and throw things on Friday, spend Saturday hungover, and then turn around Sunday morning and shout 'Hallelujah' with the rest of the churchgoers. Things got progressively worse, but in all that time, not once had his mother agreed to leave when Matt had asked her to. She'd just smile through her busted lip and tell him that they just needed to 'pray for your daddy harder.' To begin with, he'd prayed like his mama told him to, but when his father choked her in front of him because she got light beer instead of regular, he gave up on that approach.

It wasn't like he'd really thought God would listen to anything he had to say. He never answered Matt's prayers. No matter how hard he'd prayed, God turned a deaf ear to his plight. So, Matt had decided that if God wasn't going to help him, then he'd have to learn how to help himself.

Matt pulled out his cell phone as he swung open the gate with a little more force than was necessary. He needed to blow off some steam, and he knew just who to text. He sent a simple message to his group chat with a location and time. His friends knew the drill. Dan and Chris had been his partners in crime since the year before when the twins had transferred into his class. They were loud, obnoxious, and up for anything. They were the Mentos to his cola, and all he would need is a little shake to make everything he kept bottled up erupt.

His father had shaken him good that day, so hard Matt had thought his neck would snap. He'd gotten out of there as fast as he could, but not before throwing a defiant 'go to Hell' at the drunken man. If there was a Hell, he was sure his dad would have a prime spot waiting for him.

Of course, if there was a Hell, Matt also knew he'd be there too. People like him burn. He'd been taught that all his life.

Matt reached into his pocket for his smokes. He growled in frustration as he pulled out his last cigarette, slipping it between his lips before crushing the empty pack in his fist. He needed a new pack if he was going to keep his nerves in check. It was a good twenty-minute walk to the convenience store he and his friends frequented. The cashier there would turn a blind eye to their fake IDs if they slipped him a little extra to buy his silence. It was a small price to pay for twenty sticks of escape.

As he approached the store, he caught a glimpse of the twins leaning against the wall, sucker sticks poking from between their lips and hands pushed deep into their hoodie pockets. At over six feet tall, with striking blue eyes and fluffy orange hair, the boys were hard to miss. Those blue eyes found his own green ones and his friends pushed off the wall, falling into formation behind him.

“What’s the plan?” Chris inquired, slinging an arm across Matt’s much lower shoulder.

“Target practice at the tracks again?” Dan added, copying his brother from the other side, effectively making a Matt-sandwich.

“I dunno yet,” Matt grumbled, shrugging their arms off. “I just gotta get some cigs. I’m out cuz’ you fuckers keep bummin’ ‘em off me.”

“Aw, don’t be like that,” Dan whined with an exaggerated frown, “You know our mom would kill us if she caught us with ‘em.”

Matt scoffed to himself. They were so flippant about the thought. They had no idea what it was like to live with that possibility hanging over your head. Though, to be fair, it wasn't like he had ever let them in enough for them to know what bothered him. They were his closest friends, but he didn't let anyone get *that* close.

“You keep takin’ all mine and *I* might kill ya,” he said, pushing down the annoyance he felt. Entering the store, Matt turned to the twins, “Y’all get the snacks and I’ll get the smokes.”

Fifteen minutes later and ten dollars poorer, Matt stepped back out into the heat of the day. He ignored the boys’ bickering behind him in favor of peeling the cellophane strip from around his shiny, new pack of menthols. What was it about opening a fresh pack that was so satisfying? Maybe it was the anticipation of the relief he would feel after that first drag, or maybe it was the knowledge that he had gotten away with his illicit purchase. Whatever the case, Matt couldn't deny the thrill he felt pulling that first cigarette from the package.

However, the thrill was short-lived. Just as he felt the smooth paper between his fingers, the sensation was lost as his body collided with something and his cigarette fell to the ground. He looked up from the sidewalk where his fix lay to his hand where the impact had crushed the rest of his pack. Then his eyes landed on the culprit. Had it been anyone else, Matt probably would have been a little upset, but it just had to be the one person that complicated his life as much as his parents did.

Being the only openly gay guy in a very conservative school, Jesse was infamous. Matt had seen him in the halls, his eyes constantly drawn to the boy whenever he was in his vicinity. The blond was a constant target for harassment, yet he remained unbothered by the jeers of his classmates. The boy was everything Matt wished he could be: confident and unapologetic. Jesse

made him uncomfortable and nauseous, so Matt kept his distance. He watched the blond boy from afar, too afraid to reach out.

Yet, there Jesse stood, angelic and beautiful... *and too goddamned close*. Matt couldn't breathe without tasting the subtle cologne that surrounded the other boy. He felt like he had a swarm of angry bees in his belly. He glanced down at plump, pink lips forming words. He couldn't hear what the boy was saying, or anything for that matter. He could only stare, slack-jawed, as a tongue swept across those lips, leaving a shiny gloss of saliva. Sinful was the only word Matt could use to describe the thoughts that had flashed through his mind.

Jesse's hand was on his bicep when Matt zoned back in. The touch burned, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to be released or consumed by whatever fire it might bring.

"Hey, are you..." Jesse began, concern in his hazel eyes.

"Looks like the freak infected another one," a deep voice interrupted.

Matt's heart started to race as he noticed a few of the football players and cheerleaders approaching.

"Stay away if you don't wanna catch the gay!" the quarterback taunted.

The others cackled as if it were the funniest thing they'd ever heard. Jesse's face twitched almost imperceptibly in annoyance. It seemed that he wasn't as unbothered as Matt had previously believed.

"Isn't that Matt Barnes?" The cheerleader elbowed another girl from the squad.

Shit! Shit, shit, fuck! He had been recognized. What if they had noticed the way he had been staring at Jesse? What if the guys from school found out that he had been eyeing them since

eighth grade? What if they outed him to the school? No one could. God forbid it got back to his parents...

He had to do something.

“Get off me, you fuckin’ twink!” Matt yelled, shoving the boy hard. “I don’t want your disgusting mouth on me!”

Jesse stumbled backward with the force of the push. The confusion that flashed across Jesse’s face was replaced with pain as Matt’s fist connected with it. Matt could hear the jabs from the group of students. They were aimed at Jesse, but the slurs wormed their way inside him, fueling his own insecurities. The words could easily describe himself and he hated it. He stepped over to where Jesse was on his hands and knees, trying to get to his feet, but it wasn’t the blond that he saw on the ground, it was his own face looking up at him.

‘Disgusting... abomination... sissy boy... sinner...’ his own eyes mocked him, hurling all the things he’d thought about himself over the years back at him.

Matt couldn’t take it anymore. He surged forward, his foot sinking into soft flesh as he kicked and stomped the offending figure. He pounded away at his target, his bottled-up frustration finally erupting. Every impact of his fist was an unanswered prayer for God to take away his thoughts and desires. Each kick was a beating his father had given him when he’d been unable to retaliate.

He completely lost himself, blinded to everything but his own pain. It wasn’t until he felt hands dragging him away from his own limp form that he looked around. The football players were escorting their horrified girlfriends away from the crowd and there were several people with their cell phone cameras pointed at him.

“... bleeding a lot. Some boys just pulled the guy off him...” a lady was reporting into her phone, presumably to emergency dispatch.

Matt couldn't make sense of the scene. What was going on? Was someone hurt? He frowned as his gaze fell on a bloody and battered body on the ground a few feet away. *Who would do such a thing?*

“Shit, dude,” Chris said shakily, still grasping Matt's arm as if to keep him from running, “you almost killed him.”

Wait...

“What the hell, Matt?” Dan exclaimed, disgust lacing his tone. “What did Jesse ever do to you?”

Nothing. Matt couldn't get the word out. He was unable to drag his eyes away from the damage he had caused. Jesse had never done anything to deserve what he had just done to him. He had only been an effigy, a stand-in for the person he hated the most.

Matt's stomach rebelled, and he emptied its contents on the pavement in front of him, acid searing its way into the world. He was just like his father, destroying everyone he touched. No, Matt was much worse. He couldn't blame his behavior on the alcohol. He only had himself to blame.

As much as he hated his dad, Matt hated himself more.