

Ink

Heavy breathing bounced off the stairwell as if its walls were concrete springs. The door to the top floor of the dormitory was shoved open. After maneuvering through a couple hallways, Shane staggered into his room, dropped his bags to the floor, bent over, hands on his knees, and gasped for air. Elevators are for the weak, he thought, especially with that damn line.

His eyes darted around the opposite side of the room. He sighed and sat on the floor to begin unpacking.

The door opened again. A tall, tan, blond dude strolled into the room, sporting a bright purple laundry bag that was overflowing with wrinkled clothes, as well as a guitar case. Shane moved faster.

“Hey,” said the blond.

“Hi! I’m Shane,” he said with a nervous smile; he turned his head, but his arms continued their task in a flurry.

“I’m Chris.”

“Nice to meet you!” Shane found a specific piece of luggage, sprung to his feet, and shoved it into his desk drawer. He turned to face Chris.

He tilted his head at Shane. “Same to you.” He dropped his bags on his side of the room, squinting at the white walls bouncing sunlight at him. He scanned Shane’s side of the room; Shane was wearing a mathletes T-shirt from his high school and had put up a corkboard with a calendar pinned on it; some dates were already marked in red. Hell, he was already organizing his desk. Chris smirked, unzipped his backpack, and pulled out a case of beer. “So, like, can I have these in here?”

Shane froze as soon as his gaze met the bottles. He thought, this couldn't be happening; this guy walked in the room ten seconds ago. He waited for Chris to add some sort of ludicrous justification, but when it didn't happen, he sighed. "No. No, you can't."

Chris chuckled. "Huh. Glad to see you're no fun."

"Glad you figured that out sooner rather than later." Shane turned back to his bed.

Chris paced around the room a few times, glancing about. He eventually stopped in front of the window in the middle of the wall. "The window doesn't have a screen," he said, beginning to open it.

Shane didn't look up. "Really? Isn't that, like, a safety hazard or something?"

Instead of answering, Chris yelled, "Yeet!" and chucked the beers out the window.

Shane's mouth was agape. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he shouted, one of his eyes twitching.

Chris shrugged. "You said I couldn't have them in here. Besides, there's a dumpster right below us."

"That doesn't mean you can chuck them out the window!"

"My bad. Communication is key. It won't happen again." He continued to grin as if he hadn't almost given Shane an aneurism.

Shane rubbed his temples, wiggling his glasses up and down in the process. "I'm... gonna go tell the RA about the screen."

Chris hastily stepped in front of him. "Wait, don't do that! How am I supposed to dispose of other contraband?"

“I’m not going to get fined because you want to ‘yeet’ random shit out the window!”

Shane shouted, gesturing his hands.

“Aw, come on.” Chris pouted. “If we’re going to be friends, we have to make sacrifices for each other. Y’know, compromise!”

Shane squinted at him before heading out the door.

#

Chris somehow managed to navigate the cluttered mess of his floor while dancing around like a lunatic; Shane couldn’t help but glance up a few times from his textbook. Chris’ shoulder-length hair flew to the front of his face as he headbanged to what must have been the rock music of the century. The headphones shifted but held onto his head for dear life. Silver chains around his neck kept smacking him in the face, but it didn’t slow him down. His knuckles were white from the death grip he had on the 3-in-1 shower gel, shampoo, and conditioner bottle he was lip-syncing into. Despite this seemingly routine performance, he eventually tripped on a shoe and fell flat on his face.

“Uh, you alright?” Shane asked.

Chris rolled onto his stomach and took off his headphones. “Yeah.”

Shane pushed up his glasses. “What the hell were you doing?”

“I’m getting pumped for the beginning-of-the-year *fiestas*.”

“Glad to see you’re trying to impress me with your high school Spanish,” he deadpanned.

“Hey, my impeccable charm didn’t work.” He sat up and beamed like an oblivious puppy. “I’m running out of *opciones*.”

“If that’s all you got, you didn’t have much of an *opción* to begin with.”

“Ouch,” Chris laughed, using his bed as leverage to stand. “Anyway, you wanna go with me?”

“Not really.” Shane’s eyes were back on his book.

“Are you kidding? You’re reading shit before classes have even started and you’re not gonna treat yourself to a good time?” He kicked miscellaneous clothes and shoes under his bed.

“It’s through the school, so even you should be good with going.”

“I need to go through this before classes start so I can begin to interpret the mess that is the law.”

Chris turned to him. “Criminal justice major?”

“Pre-law.”

“Gross.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “What’s your major, then?”

“Music.” He gestured to the guitar case leaning up against his desk.

“Oh *God*,” Shane said, leaning back and setting his phone in his lap.

“Damn, that’s a little harsh,” Chris said, crossing his arms. “Sounds like you should play percussion; I hear it’s good for pent up aggression.”

“No, it’s just... you’re probably going to meet my mom.” Chris tilted his head at him, and Shane continued, “She’s Dr. Jameson, the vocal music professor.”

“What’s wrong with me meeting your mom?”

“Nothing. Just don’t tell her that we’re roommates; she’ll ask about me all the time.”

“What if I want to tell her about all the drugs you’re doing?”

“Then don’t be surprised when our room gets ‘randomly’ searched.”

“Gotcha.” Chris chuckled and made his way to the door. He turned back to Shane. “You sure you don’t want to go? It’ll be easier to make friends if people see that my roommate can stand me.”

“No. I don’t feel like being arm candy tonight.”

“Shame.” Chris opened the door. “See you *luego*.”

The door clicked shut and Shane grabbed a stack of papers and a red pen from his desk drawer.

#

Shane woke to a thud and a whisper-shouted, “Fuck!” He groaned and felt around for his lamp’s switch. The light revealed Chris, adorned in glow stick bracelets and cheap bead necklaces, sprawled out on the floor.

“Aw, sorry,” he said, sitting up, taking his hair out of a bun, and flicking the hair tie at Shane. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.” He worked his way to his feet.

“God, what time is it?” Shane rubbed his eyes, fumbled for his phone, and pawed for his glasses.

“Late, probably.” Chris walked over, saw the glasses nudged between Shane’s side and his bed, then handed them back to their owner.

“Thanks,” he grumbled, picking up the stack of paper he’d fallen asleep next to.

Adjusting his glasses, he analyzed his work.

“You fall asleep doing your work, nerd?” Chris laughed before adding, “That’s a lot of red. Writing not your strong suit?”

Shane quickly tossed it to the other side of him. “Yeah.”

A few moments of awkward silence passed.

“Wait, dude, check this out.” Chris turned off the lamp and a neon yellow heart glowed to life on his left cheek. “This girl had a glow-in-the dark marker and was drawing on people’s faces! Some of the professors even got in on it!”

Shane rolled over to face the wall. “Oh my God, go to bed.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re tired. I get it.” After a few moments, Chris’ bedsprings creaked. “Do you think this’ll give me Sharpie poisoning?”

“*GO TO BED!*”

#

Chris, after finishing his third consecutive encore of ABBA’s greatest hits, stepped out of the shower. After turning off the water, he could hear Shane yelling through the door.

“I’m trying to sleep, jackass!”

“And *I’m* trying to *perform!*” Chris pawed at the wall hook, but immediately jumped back like a cat. There was a huge smudge of red on their only clean towel, like a scroll of Chinese calligraphy that someone abandoned after the first stroke. Blood, he thought, but then

reasoned that it was too pink. He exhaled, grabbed his wrinkly pajama pants off the floor and jumped into them, wet. “Shane, what the hell is on the towel?”

“You mean *my* towel? Maybe you wouldn’t have to worry about it if you did laundry.”

Chris flung the door open, steam escaping like clouds from the gates of heaven. “Alright, *mom*.” He turned off the bathroom light. “But seriously, it scared the shit out of me. What’s on the towel?”

“It’s probably paint or something.”

“You paint?”

Shane looked down. “No... yes... sort of?”

“You embarrassed about painting or something?” Chris sat on his bed and grabbed his brush from the end table.

“No! I just...” Shane scanned the floor as if he were looking for a trail of ants. “My friend. They paint. They got some on me.”

“You have friends?” He ripped at a stubborn tangle. Shane glared at him and rolled over. Chris tried a, “Sorry?” but got nothing but silence.

#

Chris looked at his phone; it was about seven o’clock. He looked at Shane; the brunette’s face was still shoved into his textbook. Chris scrolled through social media and didn’t look back up until his clock read “9:14.” Shane hadn’t moved.

“Damn, you have a test already?”

“Hm?” Shane’s head popped up. “Oh, yeah.”

“When?” He took a sip of the flat, room-temperature energy drink on his desk.

“Uh... next week, I think.”

Chris almost choked. “Next *week*? Dude, you’ve gotta *chill*.”

Shane squinted and frowned. “Is there something wrong with wanting to be prepared?”

“Are you even going to remember anything by the time the test comes around?”

“*Yes*.”

Chris breathed loudly, turned ninety degrees, and leaned back. He pressed his feet into the wall and hung upside down from his bed; his hair brushed the floor. “We should go *do* something.” He looked straight at his roommate who now had his nose back in his book. “I’m bored, and your brain *has* to be, like, melting by now.”

“I’m fine.”

“C’mon,” Chris tried, “there’s gotta be *something* that sounds more appealing than studying.”

Shane turned a page. “No, not really.”

“Will you at least go get food with me? We could, like, go to the dining hall and take food from peoples’ plates until we’re caught.”

He stared at Chris for a moment before continuing his studying.

“Okay, will you get food with me *sans* the stealing part?”

“I’m good.” Shane held his arms closer to his body.

“But I’m *bored*,” Chris whined, sitting up and spinning himself back towards Shane.

“That sounds like a you problem.”

“I don’t want to, like, go by myself.”

Shane tensed. “I already told you I don’t want to go.”

“Okay, okay.” Chris got up. “You want me to bring you something back?”

“No.”

“Alright.” He walked out the door with a half-hearted, “See you *luego*.”

#

Chris had just gotten back from a 1 A.M. Walmart trip with his friends. Shane was scribbling on a stack of paper. Chris took a shower, singing whichever Panic! At The Disco songs he could remember the lyrics to. Shane was writing. He brushed his teeth despite having an energy drink ten minutes later. Shane was writing. He browsed social media until about 3 A.M. when he decided that it was probably a reasonable time to go to bed. Shane was still writing.

Chris had been staring at his wall for at least an hour. The writing sounded more like someone clawing at Shane’s desk. The scratching came like gusts of wind: seemingly uniform before growing clustered. Chris had his back to the sound, but it managed to crawl its way into his head, like the buzzing of mosquitoes. It sent cold tingles up his back. He eventually rolled over to sneak glances of whatever the hell was keeping him awake. Shane scribbled on a stack of paper under lamplight. Of course he’s doing homework, Chris thought, before he saw Shane’s trembling arms. Chris sat up and turned on his lamp; Shane nearly jumped out of his seat.

“Shane, what the hell are you doing?”

Shane whipped around in his desk chair. “You scared the hell out of me!”

“Sorry. I couldn’t sleep with the noise you’re making.”

“I... sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you up. I was just doing homework.”

“Homework?” Chris leaned back against the wall. “Dude, you look like a glob of Jell-O.”

“What?” Shane opened his desk drawer and put his project, along with his red pen, back inside it.

“You’re, like, shaking. Are you good?”

“Yeah. I’m just... cold.”

Chris looked to the pile of blankets on Shane’s bed, crumpled into a ball and unused. His eyes shifted down a bit to the red splotches all over Shane’s hands. “You’ve got ink all over you.”

Shane stood in one swift motion, pushing his chair back with his calves. He sauntered over to the sink. His shaking was worse, now. “I guess I got... carried away.” Shane wasn’t looking at Chris or even at his own hands.

“Dude, something’s wrong with you.”

“I’m fine. It’s just later than I thought it was.”

“Well, uh, you should get to bed, then.”

“I’m working on it.”

Shane turned off his lamp, leaving Chris in his own sphere of light.

#

Shane wasn't back yet. Chris plucked at strings on his guitar, but his gaze kept stopping at Shane's desk. No matter how hard he tried to focus on the music in front of him, the secrets beyond the drawer kept drawing his eyes back. He set his guitar beside him and inched towards the opposite side of the room. You shouldn't be doing this, he thought.

He sat at Shane's desk, pulling the drawer open before his conscience could stop him. He saw a stack of paper, as expected, but it was covered with an obscene amount of red writing. It took his eyes a moment to differentiate the red proofreading marks from the actual text. He read the first two paragraphs: it was a story. He could barely see the author's name under a pool of ink: Michael Dalow.

Chris pulled his phone out of his pocket and did a quick Google search of the name. There were several articles from what looked like local news sources. Headlines read things along the lines of, "Tragedy Strikes a Small Town in Oregon." Something dark formed in the pit of Chris' stomach.

A little more digging revealed that Michael Dalow had killed himself about two years ago. He was only 17. Chris hoped it was a coincidence, but Michael was from the same small Oregon town that Shane had brought up in conversation.

A rush of air entered the room as the door swung open. Chris yanked the drawer open and tried to shove the manuscript back where it belonged, but he already knew that he was caught.

"Chris?" Shane exclaimed, pulling his earbuds out of his ears. His mouth was open and he was shaking more violently than he had been the other night.

Chris stood up. "I'm sorry. I can explain."

Shane closed the door behind him, barely able to get a grip on the handle. “You... what did you...” He blinked, eyes unfocused. “Why are you at my desk? What were you looking at?”

“I was snooping, and I shouldn’t have been. But you were acting really weird the other night, and—”

“W-Why would you do that? I...” He leaned against the door.

Chris watched him shake. “Shane, are you alright?”

Shane nodded, but buried his face into his hands.

“Hey, man, maybe you should sit down.” Chris walked toward him and tried to put a hand on his shoulder but recoiled when Shane gasped, “Don’t touch me.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

Shane stepped past Chris and walked into the bathroom. His hands were wet with his tears. He shut the door, but Chris could still hear the heavy breathing inside.

He decided he would ask who Michael was at a later date.