

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter One
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
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The rest of Christmas break just speeds by. Happy moments, fits of uncontrollable laughter, tears, quality time with family and friends, lots of hot gay sex... you know, everything the holidays are supposed to be about. I won't go into the whole tearful good bye thing in too much detail 'cause we've all been there before, but the aftermath is sort of important. Well, it's very important actually. I'm worse again. We were afraid it was going to happen, and it has. I can now with the last few shreds of emotion I have remember fondly the good old days when I had that much talked about, ever elusive 'will to live'. I know it's all just stupid self-pity, and that really I have no excuse to be so depressed 'cause I'm actually one of the luckiest people on the planet, but tell that to my tear ducts. Tell that to the gaping hole where my heart used to be.

The worst thing about now is, I'm not being honest. They all think I'm bummed, but my performance is inspiring such comments as 'he's doing surprisingly well' and 'I was afraid he was going to take this much harder'. So basically, I'm being a big faker and everyone is buying it. That makes me feel a whole different kind of bad, but there's this thing that has to do with more bad feelings surprisingly enough actually making you feel even worse and not better that's causing me problems. What I'm saying is my extra guilt isn't exactly springing me out of the depths of melancholy. To make matters worse, I've been listening to like way too much Dashboard Confessionals and Smashing Pumpkins. I didn't even like them before (the Smashing Pumpkins) but they're really great if you're trying to suck a bad mood for all it's worth. I listen on headphones of course, so not even my makes you feel like killing yourself music is giving me away.

When you get right down to it, I don't think there's really anything easier in the world than feeling sorry for yourself. It requires absolutely no effort whatsoever. It's the getting over feeling sorry for yourself that's the trouble. And as you know, my track record for getting over missing Celery self-pity isn't exactly banner worthy. The real trouble as I've begun to look at it is that his leaving sucks all the energy (not to mention joy) out of me, and I therefore don't have any left to drag myself out. I don't even have enough energy to grab hold of those who would offer their hands as aid. Not that they're aware of how much aid I'm currently in need of.

It's because they don't know, it's because of the act I've been performing so convincingly, that I'm able to be sitting here now, with Jonas cuddled against Kyle at my side. On my lips, the emotionally void smile that's been there these past two weeks. They're talking and though I can't honestly claim I've been listening, whenever they laugh at something, I'll laugh

along.

Oh. Hold on. They're laughing right now. I think Kyle made the joke, something about moose invasions. Which I suppose is some kind of reference to the old British Whose Line Is It Anyway episodes. I'm pretty sure I'd think it was funny if I wasn't all with the feeling dead inside.

"Dude," I blink a couple times and wait for someone to talk.

"Dude," Kyle says again. Talking to me then. Okay. Just give me a second.

I have to blink some more, and shake my head a little, almost like waking up. It's something I usually need to do when someone talks to me these days. My act's only major flaw is that I tend to be a little slow on the uptake.

"Yeah?" Like a minute later. You know, slow.

"Shouldn't you be ranting about how Whose Line went to hell after Drew Carey replaced Clive Anderson as host?" Kyle teases, though there's a small hint of concern in his voice and eyes.

"Don't you have that one memorized by now?" I tease back, also struggling to keep my tone light.

"Memorized? It's been permanently burned into my brain. The routine you and Celery used to do about the fall of Whose Line into crude lameness is something I doubt anyone who ever heard it could hope to forget." Despite myself, I wince at his mention of Celery.

What's maybe been the most painful thing about these past two weeks is the infrequent contact between Celery and myself. My suspicion is that he hasn't been faring any better than me in all this and that this is what is causing his reluctance. I know it's what's been standing in my way. I think we both feel like if we don't put the other in contact with our sadness, we're protecting him from something. Insane, since we both know pain is lessened when shared, but sanity really never has been a deciding factor in either of our lives. We've only talked three times, and we've hardly even pretended to be stock-piling minutes. He's sounded so toneless, so empty. I hated every minute of each call, knowing my voice was reflecting back the exact same thing. So now it's been over a week since we last spoke. No one knows this of course. They don't know any of it.

"Forget? Now why on earth would anyone want to do that?" Kyle gives my head a light shove with two fingers.

"Goof," I smile. I'm starting to forget what smiling when you really mean it feels like.

"Care?" I look at Jonas.

"Yeah?" His eyes are narrowed.

"What were we talking about before?"

"What?" I say while trying to sound confused and innocent.

"Before Kyle shouted moose invasion for no good reason and we all started laughing, what were we talking about?" Fuck. Fuck. And once more with feeling, FUCK.

"Um," I falter pathetically, trying to come up with something and ending up with nothing.

He nods sadly.

"That's what I thought." He gets up off Kyle and stands in front of me, having to crouch only a little due to his lack of height for us to be eye to eye.

I nervously brush some of my hair behind my ear, twisting the ends and he continues his scrutiny of me.

"This has been going on the whole time?" he eventually asks, voice heavy with sadness and disappointment. The disappointment's more with himself than me though, I think.

I give up and nod after a minute or two.

"Uh, what's been going on?" Kyle asks cluelessly. Jonas sighs.

"Carrots here has been pulling a Ben Folds Five."

"What?"

"But if my mind's somewhere else, you won't be able to tell, I do the best imitation of myself," I supply dully. Jonas gives the ` that's what I'm talking about' nod.

"So... WHAT?" is Kyle's I'm-still-totally-in-the-dark response.

"He's been acting okay but the idiots we are couldn't see that he's totally not," Jonas spells it out.

"Well I knew that," Kyle says like he thought everyone did.

"What?" Jonas sputters, shaking his head. "What are you talking about, you knew? You didn't know anything."

"Sure I did." Kyle scoffs. "You're my fucking BROTHER, Carrots," he says, going eye to eye with me. "Did you actually think I didn't know what was going on? Oh yeah, the love of your life just left, you're fine!" He shakes his head, looking unimpressed. "How stupid do you think I am? You think I don't know you better than that?" Jonas and I are both dumbfounded.

"If you knew, why've you been letting me get away with it?" He sighs, putting his hand on my shoulder.

"Because I've been waiting for you to be ready to talk about it yourself."

"That doesn't sound like you," I say, with what almost passes for genuine humour (the sarcastic kind but hey - progress!). Kyle smiles.

"Yeah well, I know. But this time, bullying you into something was just going to make things worse, push you deeper into yourself - that's why I didn't say anything to you, goldie," he directs his last comment to Jonas.

He calls him that sometimes. Goldie. I think it's 'cause of the colour of Jonas's hair, like, goldie locks you know? The locks are the dreads, the gold leftovers from when he still coloured his hair. Or maybe it's just 'cause Kyle's insane. Either way, Jonas doesn't seem to mind. The only thing that bothers him is that once or twice, they've fought and Kyle's called him Ben. Which, you have to admit is a pretty low blow.

"You really knew?" Kyle smiles patiently.

"Really."

"I'm like, impressed," and I'm feeling forgotten about. But I can't exactly get mad at them. I mean, how many times have Celery and I done the same thing to them and a million other people?

"I'm glad, but getting back to the issue at hand," he claps my shoulder once and then releases me. "You've had two weeks, that's long enough. It's time to get over this," I say nothing. "Carrots, I mean it. We're not going down that road again. Not for that many weeks. We're not going to let it happen to you and you're not going to let it happen to Celery," damn him and how he always knows my weaknesses. "You haven't been calling him, have you?" he asks with surprising gentleness, noticing the look in my eyes. "You've got to, little bro, okay, you know I'm right. Enough with the imitation, we all prefer the real thing. Go call your boy, work this thing out the way I know you only can if it's together," I just keep sitting there with a sullen look on my face.

"Dude, you've got to!" Jonas like cries out in frustration. "This can't happen again, you need to--"

Not being even slightly in the mood to listen, I just get up while Jonas is talking and walk out of there. All the way out of the house in the end. Past Mom who asks me where I'm going, slipping into sneakers and my jacket, out the door. It's the end of the act, I guess. It's totally fucked now, not that I would have had much hope of fixing things after that little scene. I walk for the longest time. My neighbourhood's full of windey streets and little like cul de sac thingies, so the whole going nowhere in particular thing is pretty easy to do. Other than staying away from the old school ground, it's all about wandering aimlessly. I'm just not ready to face any of it yet.

I'm starting to think there's something seriously wrong with me. I have NO good reason not to be like singing the Happy Song every second of every day of my life. I'm just like the biggest suck on the planet. I don't know when I had the time to learn to be so great at feeling sorry for myself and being depressed, considering how like picture perfect my whole childhood was. Sure I had the whole gay secretly in love with my best friend thing to deal with, but to be honest that never really bothered me that much. Basically 'cause yeah, I always pretty much figured I'd be able to get him to love me too. I never told you that. It's pretty fucked up, but back when I didn't think he was gay or whatever, I was well on my way to convincing myself I'd be able to get him to love me anyway, just 'cause I was so used to Celery doing everything for me. He doesn't get that about himself, or maybe he does and he just doesn't think it's a bad thing, but in every way Celery's dedicated himself to making my life easier. That's the thing, I guess, which is the reason I do so badly on my own. I'm not used to having to deal with my own problems and face things, I'm used to having this big strong blond guy to run to whenever things get tough who'll just put his arms around me and fix stuff.

Despite what he said about it, I do still think most of my so called progress between Thanksgiving and Christmas was a big lie. The same as now really, except then I wasn't admitting to myself I was faking it. I was fooling me and the people around me. I don't know about Celery. Maybe he really was doing okay on his own. Maybe he's even doing okay now, and the reason he hasn't been calling is 'cause he just doesn't miss me.

I told you I was fucked up. I mean, listen to me. That's the kind of shit I've been convincing myself of lately. I KNOW Celery misses me. There's no sane part of my mind that doubts it. He doesn't miss me like beached fish don't miss water. But I'm still going on these little trips in my head, believing shit like that.

Man, I'm cold. Stupid Manitoba. January is the worst month of the year, bar

none. It's dark and freezing and by then any charm the snow seemed to have is gone 'cause everything's just dirty and it's a pain to walk in. You've got exams if you're still in school. Even if you're not, and even if you live in some like tropical paradise, I bet January still sucks. I'd say we should abolish the month altogether, except then February would have to be a lot longer, and the only thing February's got going for it is the fact that it's only 28 days long. Even the extra leap year day ruins February, never mind trying to squeeze the whole month of January in there.

Maybe I should take up smoking or something. That would warm me up, wouldn't it? But no, that's not the answer. I'd have to smoke outside, which would just make me cold on a regular basis. Plus I don't have the money for it. Plus, it's idiotic to pay a company to kill you (props to the gum guy in Clerks). Plus, Celery would kill me. Plus, the second hand smoke would probably kill him. Nope. Definitely smoking isn't the answer to my problems.

I could become an alcoholic. Drinking makes you forget, right? Or maybe I could start smoking pot or something. You kill enough brain cells, who cares how much your heart hurts. But there's still the whole issue of me not having enough money and Celery killing me. Additionally, I don't know any drug dealers and I don't really feel like hanging out with a bunch of drop out space cadets who think it's funny to buy underaged kids beer. Damnit. I'm fresh out of ideas. And I'm still really cold. I'm bound to wuss out and start back for home soon, except I really don't want to face that kind of music right now. Gotta think.

Hey! Kaleb. I'll just go to Kaleb's. He'll be happy to see me - he always is. We'll just hang out for awhile, listen to some music or whatever, just so I can warm up and calm down. Then I'll think about going home. Or maybe I'll even stay the night if he'll let me. I'll be sleeping on the floor guy for once. That's one thing I missed out on being friends with Celery - sleepovers at other people's houses. Their house was never exactly the place to be.

Now, I'm pretty sure I remember where he lives, I know for sure what his house looks like anyway, and what street it's on, just need to figure out how to get there from here. First of all, let's figure out where here is. Good. Street sign. Okay. This is excellent, Kaleb's place is just on the next block. Brilliant.

I blow on my fists and sort of run on the spot, standing on Kaleb's porch waiting for someone to answer the door. After what sure felt like forever to my poor freezing ears, the door opens.

"Dude, you're like shaking," Kaleb says, alarmed and pulling me inside before I even get a chance to talk.

"Thanks," I say, my teeth chattering. He nods distractedly, looking at me worriedly.

"What's the matter?"

"Huh? Nothing, I just went for a walk and then thought I'd drop by," I start to feel a bit bad about just barging in. "Is that okay? Are you busy?" He shakes his head.

"No, it's just, you look really awful," I give him a 'gee thanks' type smile. He grins a little. "Sorry, but it's true. You're all red and like I said, you were shaking before." He starts getting me out of my jacket. "Are you warming up yet?" I nod through another shiver.

"Thanks."

"Let's like go make some hot chocolate and then we can talk," hot chocolate sounds good, but we'll see about the talking. I don't say anything though, I just follow him into his kitchen.

I've been to Kaleb's a few times before, but a lot of the times we've hung out we just went somewhere in a group, or at least with Shane. It's hardly ever been just the two of us, and never the two of us alone in his house.

"Where's your mom?" Kaleb lives with his mom only. His dad is remarried and lives in B.C. That's where they lived too before he moved here in the middle of last year. His mom got a new job and I guess he doesn't get along with his dad so Kaleb moved here with her.

"She's at work," he says, measuring out cocoa powder.

"Oh," he winks.

"I have you all to myself," I pretend to laugh nervously. Really, I'm not concerned. Kaleb just doesn't think of me that way anymore, and I've never felt about him like that, so there's nothing to stress about.

"I'm scared."

"You should be," he says in a like grave, little kid voice. You know what that sounds like. When some six-year-old tells you something they think is incredibly serious and they look at you with those big serious little kid eyes. Maybe I'm making it all up, I don't know. Hopefully you get what I'm saying. Not that you normally do.

"And I am," he just chuckles and finishes making the hot chocolate, the water he got hot in the microwave while I was pretending to be terrified.

"Here you go," Kaleb says, setting down my cup and sitting down with his. He looks at me intently across the table.

"Thanks," he smiles.

"Don't mention it," he sighs. "So, let's talk," I scrunch my lips a little.

"I'm not really in the talking mood."

"Oh no?" I'm kind of dumb. Why exactly did I think Kaleb would be easy?

"No," he reaches over and briefly squeezes my hand, looking deeply into my eyes.

"You're my friend, Carrots, you're a better friend than I ever thought you'd be able to be. I almost ruined our shot by having feelings for you, but the point of getting over them was supposed to be that we'd be able to hang out finally. Well, that and me being sick of liking someone who I knew was never going to like me back," I smile sympathetically at the memory. "So dude, now that we're friends, you're supposed to talk to me about stuff. That's how the whole friendship thing works. Something's obviously bothering you pretty bad and I'm guessing 'cause of the whole roaming the streets thing it's something you're avoiding having to discuss with the people at home. But if you thought you could come to old Kaleb's and not have to deal with anything you were sadly mistaken," I have to smile sheepishly at that. "Nice try though, bud," he says with a grin.

"You're really going to make me bare my soul to you?" I pout almost cheerfully. Something about all this is putting me in a weirdly good mood.

"Yep," I don't know what it is that he said or whatever it is that's possessed me, but I actually feel like talking. Maybe it's 'cause of his like distance from the whole thing. Or from Celery. I don't know.

"Okay," I say, sighing with only a slight bit of reluctance. I lay it all out for him. The way I've been acting, pretending to be okay, the distance between me and Celery, the confrontation with Jonas and Kyle, all the insanity. Kaleb just listens silently, nodding at some things, giving my hand the occasional squeeze, reacting in quiet but comforting ways. I feel a lot better when I'm done.

"So basically, I mean, what I'm getting from what you told me is - you're just being a total asshole," I laugh.

"Yeah. That's about right," Kaleb gets up and motions for me to do the same. I do, and walk over to him. He gives me a hug. I smile uncertainly.

"I can't be that guy, Carrots," he says, shrugging.

"What guy?"

"The guy you use to escape your life for awhile. I can't be the Spike to your Buffy," I roll my eyes at the reference, accompanied with a small smirk. "Times are tough right now, I get that, but running out of it and coming over here to me," he shakes his head, "That's just not going to work. Not for you or me. For one thing, I don't want to risk my old feelings for you coming up 'cause I really do want to make this thing I have with Shane last. For another thing, talking to me and hanging with me instead of with Kyle and Jonas isn't going to solve your problems. Denying you feel something and pretending for awhile that it isn't there doesn't make things better. I'm not saying I'm not cool to hang out with you - I love having you around - but not for this reason. It's like, come for ME, you know? Not 'cause I'm some last resort safety." Damn, that boy's good at laying a guilt trip on you. Of course, the fact that's he's totally right is helping his case.

I sigh.

"I'm so sorry, man," he smiles.

"That's okay. I would have come to me too if I were you," he winks. "We're alike, remember? Anyway, since you did come here, I get to be advice guy, and since you're in my house, you have to do what I tell you," I eye him warily.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Call Celery," I knew it.

"No, man," I say, like rolling my shoulders. "I'm not ready for that yet," he shrugs.

"I don't care. I told you, my house - you have to do what I say."
He walks over and grabs the phone from its holster, comes back over and offers it to me.

"Call him up," he orders. With some reluctance and a good deal of pouting, I take the phone.

"Um," he smiles.

"I'll see you in awhile," Kaleb says and walks out of the room.

I sit down again and stare at the phone for awhile. I finally find the courage to dial, and drum my fingers nervously as it rings.

"Hello?" His voice sounds weird, like he's confused. Which is weird, 'cause I'm the only one who ever calls him on his cell.

"Hey, Cel," I say.

"Carrots?" Um, yeah.

"Yeah, who'd you think it was?" This is very weird.

"Well, I didn't know. It said T Mackie on my caller ID," right, 'cause I'm at Kaleb's. Of course.

"Oh yeah, that's 'cause I'm calling from Kaleb's house."

"What?" Sounding a bad mix of worried and upset. "Why?"

"It's um, like a long story. But, mostly it's 'cause I ran out of the house and like roamed the streets until I was half frozen to death and decided since I wasn't ready to go home I'd kick it over to Kaleb's house." There's a long pause as Celery digests what I've just told him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, or no. I don't know."

"Baby, you have to explain yourself better than that," I love his trying to sound calm while panicking tone. And by love I naturally mean hate.

"Well like," I don't know where to start. It's so much harder telling him. Admitting I've basically been lying to him, that I've failed us. A few more seconds of this and I'm going to start to cry.

"Baby?" Well, not surprisingly, that does it. I start wailing into the phone, to the panicked pleadings of Celery for me to stop. I do eventually.

"Sorry, I... I'm like really messed up right now," I say once I've gotten myself together marginally.

"I'm not doing so great myself at the moment," he remarks dryly. I chuckle sadly.

"Really? Whatever for?"

"Care," he says warningly. I do my millionth sigh of the day.

"Sorry, again. Look, the simple fact is I've been incredibly pissed off and depressed since you left and I've only been faking the whole happiness, doing okay thing. I've really missed you and we haven't even been talking

much and I don't really understand why and I've just been really upset and sad lately. Jonas finally called me on it today when he figured out I wasn't even listening to what Kyle and him were talking about and only laughing in the right places 'cause I heard they were. But instead of dealing with them I ran out of the house. I walked around for ages until like I said I was freezing cold and I needed to warm up. I went to Kaleb's house and we talked for awhile and he got me to call you 'cause he's a really good guy who for some reason puts up with my crap and is somehow able to understand my fucked up brain. So that's the whole story. I'm sorry if I wasn't able to just blurt that out the second after you picked up the phone," I wait for him to say something, but honestly, if that outburst surprised him half as much as it did me, it's going to be awhile before Celery responds.

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"Hunh," he says finally, in a strangely light tone. "So in retrospect, the whole denial, just having fun and refusing to try to deal with our inevitable feelings after my departure... maybe not the best idea?" I laugh, out of surprise and a bunch of far more complicated emotions.

"I think you nailed that one right on the head, sweet one."

"And here I was afraid it was only me," this is just too fucking ironic. I just know a whole wack of people are having a big laugh at me somewhere.

"You too, huh?"

"Oh yeah. The worry that you weren't calling because you were doing great and not even thinking about me. The insecurities, the emptiness, the feeling like death, the outward acting okay, I've done it all."

"So what this all boils down to is that we're both incredibly stupid," I can almost feel his smile through the phone.

"That about sums it up, yes."

"We're really never going to learn, are we?"

"No, no, probably not," again with the warm almost amused vibes coming my way.

"Oh man. I've been a total loser since you left, I've got some like serious apologizing to do," I say ruefully, remembering Jonas and Kyle. Make that and everyone else too.

"What about me?" He feigns hurt. I smile. I wish he could see it. But maybe he can feel it.

"I'm sorry, sweet one," I really am too. Serious and kidding at the same time.

"I know. Me too, baby," the exact way.

"So what are we going to do about it?" And that's the hard part, right? Actually acting differently after we're hung up the phone and have to go back to separate living again. It stumps him for awhile, and I'm not exactly alive with ideas myself.

"I guess we just do like we did before, but actually mean it this time. We do the ` and if at first you don't fricassee, fry, fry again' thing," that's from a really old book. I don't even remember what it's called, but it's from back in the day, and this kid has to recite the real thing, but his older brother tells him that fake one to help him remember or maybe just to joke around (I can't remember which) but in the end all the kid can remember is the fake one. Anyway, you probably weren't looking for that long an explanation, but that's not my problem.

"Do y'think we need to make a pact?" That gets a chuckle.

"Just honestly tell me you'll try and I'll believe you."

"You'll say the same thing?"

"Yep."

"And we have to mean it?"

"Yes, baby," he says with amusement and love.

"There's going to be a whole lot of frying again," I caution.

"I know. But, two weeks is enough," that sounds familiar.

"That's what Kyle said."

"Well, Kyle's a smart guy."

"Yeah I'll be sure to tell him he's finally tricked someone into thinking so."

"You just radiate brotherly love."

"You know it."

"Baby?"

"Yeah?"

"You're going to try?" I steel myself to answer. I search my heart to make sure I can truly reply honestly.

"Yes," a sigh of relief escapes Celery.

"Good. I promise too."

"I believe you."

"You get that I want to be holding you right now, right?"

"Almost as much as you get I want the same thing, right?"

"Right."

"I love you so much, Celery, I don't know how I almost let myself lose sight of that," starting to feel the return of the crying mood of a few minutes ago.

"I love you too, Care, and I think the losing sight thing may have something to do with your insanity," I breathe out a short laugh at that.

"Razor sharp insight as always, my love."

"It's what I'm famous for," ever the modest one.

"It's why you're a legend," I follow along.

"Tell me something, baby," he says, cutting out that vein of thinking. "Do I owe this call to Kaleb?" Despite his even tone, I cringe a little.

"Yes," my eternally honest nature forces me to reply. Don't even think about snickering. Yeah, that's right. I saw you.

"You should get him over here so I can thank him," my relief is immense, and I smile big because of it.

"I'm glad you're not mad."

"I can't be mad at any situation where I get to talk to you out of the deal."

"This must be how you got me in bed so fast," I reflect. "'Cause you're such a smooth talker."

"Fast! I don't think so. 11 years, remember?" I grin.

"Oh yeah."

"Seriously though, give him my thanks, okay?"

"Does this mean we have to say goodbye now so I can go thank him for us?"

"I think maybe there are some things you need to do, baby," he reminds me gently.

"Okay," I sigh. "But, I'm calling you again later, okay?"

"No. I don't want to talk to you anymore."

"Real funny. Like, take that show on the road." I pout.

"Love you, baby."

"Me too, so, um, like, bye?"

"Until later, when you call me again."

"Alright, I'm kissing you in my mind"

"Just kissing?"

"Shut-up," I whine through the blush he can't see but will probably still know is there.

"Bye, baby, I love you."

"Love you too, bye," with difficulty, I hang up.

I go searching for Kaleb and find him listening to music in his room. Under headphones, back against his wall, eyes closed, feet swinging vaguely to the rhythm. I've never really told you what Kaleb looks like, have I? Aside from his troublesome hotness, that is. Well, there's definitely that. He's just your regular guy when it comes to height, five 8 or 9, and he's not built or anything, but he's, uh, nicely shaped. And he's got a killer face. Pretty dark, almost black hair and sort of permanently tanned skin, but then his blue eyes come out of nowhere and you can't help but stare at him. Which, in case you hadn't guessed, is exactly what I'm doing right now.

"Hey, dude," he greets me mellowly, taking off the ` phones and turning off his tape player.

"Hi," I say, almost but thankfully not quite blushing.

"So did you guys sort stuff out?" I grin. A real grin and everything.

"Yeah, and he told me to tell you thanks," he raises an eyebrow.

"Thanks? Not – tell him to keep his dirty paws off my boyfriend?"

"Celery's not like that," I protest, even though I'm pretty sure he was just goofing around. He smiles.

"I know, but you have to admit - he's insane when it comes to protecting you," I shrug.

"You're not wrong."

"Don't sound so surprised," I roll my eyes.

"What's up with the tape player?" I ask, deciding it's time we got off this topic. This topic being me. "I didn't think there was anyone left in the world who listened to tapes except maybe in their cars," he puts a hand defensively over his, well, I guess it's like a boom box.

"I happen to love tapes. Sure you have rewind them and that's like the most annoying thing ever, and sure the quality's way better on CDs, but tapes are about like memories, you know? Like, someone makes you a mix CD and it's like, ` okay, they filled in a bunch of songs, and downloaded them while they were like, out having fun' or something. But you get a mix TAPE and you know real time and thought went into it. Like, you've seen High Fidelity, right?" I laugh.

"Yeah," I love that movie.

"So you should understand why I still believe in tapes. And records, records are very cool," I notice just then that he's actually got a record player on his floor.

I sigh the sigh of someone giving up.

"Okay, I know. CDs are for losers, but I'm just not like pure enough or whatever for tapes and records. I like my easy modern conveniences."

"And that's cool, to each his own, dude." This is all pretty strange. I mean, just, feeling normal. Acting normal and even happy, and like, meaning it. Strange, but I can't say I hate it.

"Welcome back, man," Kaleb says, breaking up my little mind vacation. I smile at him.

"Thanks."

"You should get home," he says more seriously. I nod.

"I know. There's a lot of pissed off, worried people wondering where I am right now."

"So go, let 'em know. Want a ride?" A ride?

"Sure," I say, grinning at the idea of not having to walk back in the dark and cold.

"Okay then, lettuce go."

"Lame, man," I say, shaking my head and following him out of the room.

"Whatever, vegetable boy," Kaleb replies calmly, not even turning his head back to look at me.

Kaleb takes a short cut back to my house I never knew existed that could have saved me at least 5 minutes of freezing my ass off walking to his house, and I grouse about it the entire way home.

"You're the most annoying passenger I've ever had," he informs me cheerfully as I'm undoing my seat belt. I smile.

"Thanks," that's when I realize that if we're in the driveway, it means the Le Baron isn't. Which means it's gone. Not good.

I sigh.

"Gonna sneak in through the back?" Kaleb asks and suggests. Now there's a good idea.

"Yeah, I can get to my room that way," I just don't think I can handle the walk of shame right now.

"Okay, dude, good luck," I smile gratefully.

"Thanks - for like, all of it. The ride, before at your house... thanks a lot," he shrugs.

"Just being a friend."

I give his shoulder a gentle parting slug and exit the car. I go through the gate into the backyard and manage to climb up to the balcony without killing myself (though there were a few close calls). I spend about five minutes just sitting on my bed before taking one of those 'face the music' breaths and making my way to Kyle's apartment. I figure at least one of them still has to be there.

The door's not locked, and I let myself in without knocking. Jonas is pacing around the space which basically amounts to the front-hall, and when he sees me his emotions pass across his face. Surprised, relieved, and finally a little pissed off. All totally understandable, valid reactions.

"Hey," I greet him quietly. "Where's Kyle?"

"Out in the Le Baron, driving around, looking for you," I nod.

"That's what I thought."

"Where the hell'd you go, Carrots?" he asks none too gently. I sigh and walk over to the couch, sitting down. He joins me, face softening slightly.

"I'm really sorry," seemed like a good way to start. Seeing as I am and all. "I've been like the biggest loser since Celery left - and I guess I mean all the way back from the first time really. I just don't know how to get my act together without him. I can't ever seem to truly get used to functioning in my life if he's not around. I'm not even sure I know who I am beyond him. I'm just the guy who loves Celery, you know? I've always been happy to have that define me but now that he's not around, I don't know how to BE. But like, I don't want to be making all these excuses all night so you'll feel sorry for me and not like hold me accountable for my actions. I've been a shithead and I need to make up for that, I'm just not sure... I mean, I'll try and everything."

"I know," Jonas says, suddenly putting his arm around my shoulders, and gives me the old one-armed hug. We're a matched set of sad smiles.

"This has all been harder for you than I think any of us can even imagine. I'm guessing there are reasons for that that we don't even know about - maybe that you don't even fully understand yourself. I don't think you'll find anyone who expects you to just suddenly be perfect and happy all of the time - we just want you to be honest with us. And let us help you and like be there for you when you fall. And also, we just want to be your friends, you know? You're my brother and I love you. I miss you." It's weird the way I didn't realize I missed him too until just now. Jonas, Kyle, everyone. Most of me is taken up missing Celery, but I've got a whole nother kind of missing going on for all of them.

Jonas is grinning, 'cause I think he knows he's gotten through.

"How do you get inside my head so good, dude?" I ask him, shaking my head a little. He does the proud beam thing.

"Sheer brilliance and a heart of gold," I laugh, and it's not one of those fake so as to not arouse suspicion ones either. It feels so good on my throat.

"That's what I thought it was," I say seriously once I'm done laughing.

Kyle returns about 20 minutes later, looking ragged and distraught. A lot of mostly unreadable emotions flood his eyes when he first sees me and he just stands there staring dumbly, wordless.

"It's okay," Jonas tells him calmly. "We've been working stuff out," Kyle processes this, and eventually starts to relax some. He comes over to sit with us on the couch.

"Where were you?" That's something I never got around to answering Jonas.

"Mostly walking, but when the fact that I was freezing started to be a problem I went over to Kaleb's," this doesn't go over well with either of them, that's clear by the looks on their faces. "Just to talk," I assure, even though that should be obvious. "And anyway, basically all he did was let me vent some and then made me call Celery," Kyle's eyes widen and Jonas also seems surprised.

"Really?" he asks, sounding slightly suspicious. I nod.

"Really."

"So you and Celery talked?" Kyle asks in that wanting to be hopeful tone. I nod again.

"Yeah, we got some stuff out in the open. It was just so stupid mostly, you know? All the past two weeks. Somehow our idiot brains had us tricked into believing the other one didn't care or some such nonsense, that's a lot of what was getting me down so much." They respond to that little admission with looks of utter disbelief.

"You lied to us all by pretending to be fine while you were dying inside 'cause you actually convinced yourself Celery didn't miss you?" Jonas says like he can't believe what he's heard.

"Yeah. I know. Don't worry, I know," Kyle pats my shoulder.

"I don't know anyone who lets their old habits die as hard, little brother, but at least you're finally getting with it," I smile.

"Thanks for not being too pissed." He shrugs.

"I was, but mostly just 'cause I was so like scared and stuff."

"Same here," Jonas jumps on the bandwagon.

"I'm sorry for this afternoon, but like, I'm sorry for the whole two weeks, you know? I feel like I've missed a lot of stuff with you guys even though I was like 'there' when most of it was happening," I sigh, feeling and probably looking kind of sheepish, "If you don't think it'd make you all pissed off again, do you think you guys could like, fill me in on what's been going on lately?" They smile.

"We could probably be persuaded."

After about an hour of catch up, I'm pretty blown away. Apparently I missed two fights (one of them real and the other a joke), Alex breaking up with his Transcona girlfriend, Brian joining choir for some reason that I think has to do with a girl but still isn't totally clear to me, and Brad Winters (that asshole who asked me for a blowjob way back in the day) being expelled for getting caught while some chick was going down on him in the boys' locker room.

"Wow," I say. "I tuned out a pretty eventful two weeks," Jonas shrugs.

"I just don't know how I didn't catch on sooner. I mean, with crap like that going down - especially the stuff with Brad - which is still a major scandal by the way - I don't know how I fell for your half-assed responses."

"I've got the gestures and sounds, got the timing down - it's uncanny, yeah, you'd think it was me," I quote more of Best Imitation of Myself by the Ben Folds Five. Yes. I am quite a fan of them. Because they're good. That's why.

"How do you even know what he's talking about?" Kyle asks Jonas, which to me seems like a way random question. "I mean, I thought you only listened to French music," what?

"What?" Jonas shrugs.

"Usually, I don't like to listen to stuff where I can understand what they're saying. I sort of prefer music with no singing at all, but if there has to be people singing, I at least don't need to be distracted by WHAT. But I do like the Five, and some Weakerthans stuff, you know, just enough to pick on most of your lame quotes," I give him a sort of stink face but leave my immature retaliations at that.

"And people say I'M weird. But moving right along, there's something else I wanted to know about. I feel really bad about this, like, that girl, um what was her name? Erica?" Both Kyle and Jonas's expressions turn kind of sour, "I haven't been able to be there for you about any of that. How did your talk with her go?" I mean, I assume he's called her by now. It's been almost three weeks.

Jonas like squirms uncomfortably.

"Welllll."

"You haven't called her yet?"

"Not so much."

"But it's been like--"

"I know."

"He definitely knows," Kyle mutters with a definite dark flavour. I raise my eyebrows.

"I'm guessing we've stumbled onto what the real fight was about?"

"Even when you've completely bypassed two weeks, you don't miss a thing," and it's happy tones all around!

"Kay, detecting major bad vibes here. What's going on? Jonas, what's holding you back from calling her?" He like shrugs and rolls his eyes.

"It's called fear. I mean, what if she gets totally pissed off at me and like outs me to the whole town? We still know people there, it would get back to my parents for sure."

"She probably wouldn't - wait a minute," I blink a few times. "Did you say you're worried about your parents finding out?" I just stare at him wide eyed a minute. "They don't know?" Jonas shakes his head miserably. I think we've found the underlying reason for the marital discord.

"How could they not know?"

"Well, the fact that I've dated girls combining with the whole me not telling them thing,"

In case you're a little lost or confused, what I've managed to do here is totally get the spotlight off myself. There's no way I have to worry about them being mad at me seeing as they're so busy being mad at each

other. Seriously, the glare action alone is getting pretty nasty.

"They wouldn't be cool with it?"

"They would - he just still doesn't want to tell them."

"How do you know how they'd react, Kyle?" Jonas demands heatedly. I don't think this is exactly new ground for them. "I told you - you didn't grow up with them. You think every ex-hippie is as cool as your mom or dad? Not all of us are that lucky."

"Dude, I've met your parents. They're good people."

"Whatever," Jonas says, folding his arms and displaying all other manner of `angry' body language. "You have no idea what you're talking about. I've tried to explain it to you but you obviously think I'm like too stupid to even know how my parents would react even though I've like, known them my whole life whereas you've only met them like twice."

"I don't think you're stupid."

"Okay, so then you think I'm a coward."

"Jonas!" Kyle sounds both angry and alarmed. "That's not what I think at all. I just don't get it!"

"They wouldn't let me see you, alright?!" Jonas suddenly explodes. It takes a minute for his rapid breathing to regulate, and he slumps as it does, shaking his head to himself.

"They just wouldn't. They wouldn't let me stay over anymore and they'd always be asking me about stuff we did. I just... I don't want another one of my relationships put under their microscope. That's a lot of what fucked up everything with Erica - they were always interfering. They didn't really like her much, you know? Maybe later it was 'cause they knew we were sleeping together, but even before. Like more than half the fights we had had something to do with stuff my parents put in my head about her, I was just too like young or naive to get what they were doing. But even now that I'm older, I know the way they manipulate me. They still have so much more power over me than I want. Even though mostly they're really good parents, it's like I'm all they have or something. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong, but it feels like they don't want me to grow up - like, more so than normal parents even. We don't really keep in contact with any other members of the extended family, so it's just always been only the three of us. Ever since..." His voice dies and his eyes flash, just from the light catching on his unshed tears. It's a long few seconds before he continues.

"It could be that it's even subconscious, you know? Maybe they don't mean

to do what they do to me, but it's like every time I get really close to someone, they start picking out faults and trying to put in a wedge between me and that person. It's what happened with Erica, it's what made me never try to get more serious with Sam, and Kyle, I just... I just am so scared that they'll do something that'll make me lose you," just call me Pandora.

Kyle's gone mute again, but he does find presence of mind enough to take Jonas in his arms. I seriously cannot believe how many layers of baggage we keep uncovering about that guy. I mean, I don't know about you, but I still remember the days when I thought he was one of the most together people I knew.

"Shush," Kyle soothes, rocking him slightly. "It's okay, goldie. I'm not going anywhere. Just let it out."

Jonas appears to calm down, only to start up again in a sketchy voice, "It's not even that you're a guy. Anyone who I let get close to me in that way is a threat. They're fine with me having friends - in a group, as long as I never pick out any one person. So long as I make sure I'm not singling anyone out for more attention than they're comfortable with. Do you know I've never had a best friend really? Before you Erica was the only thing that came close and there was always a certain level of distance there. Near the end, she wanted to get closer, but I couldn't let that happen. By the time I figured out why it was too late. But I promised myself that if I ever got another chance it would never happen like that again. Except sometimes I feel myself starting to pull away from you and then I know all over again the power they still have over me. I mean, I love them, you know? That's the thing. I love them and I don't want to disappoint or hurt them. After Erica I think they thought they'd gotten me back. I don't know what it'd do to them to be told they've lost me for good."

"Lost you for good?" Kyle asks weakly. A smile finds its way onto Jonas's tear streaked face and he wiggles back enough to take Kyle's in his hands.

"To you, Kyle. I'm yours forever. You know that, right? There's no getting rid of me for as long as you're willing to keep me around. Any fears I have, they have nothing to do with me falling out of love with you. I know that'll never happen. I just sometimes can't help thinking with all that's wrong with me you couldn't possibly be able to feel the same." I really did mean to get up and give them this moment, but I'm sort of like glued to my seat over here. Okay, so not literally, but you get what I'm saying.

"There is NOTHING wrong with you, Jonas," Kyle states slowly and firmly so as to be absolutely clear. "And I feel exactly the same way, okay? Not sort of or some of the time. Totally and all of the time. I love you and you're practically my whole freaking world."

He leans over and gives my foot a kick. "Other than this guy, the rest of

the people in this house and Celery, I've got no one else in my heart or life that means nearly as much as you. I know that sometimes I'm an insensitive jerk and that I push way too often about stuff that's better off left alone but I never want you thinking my heart doesn't match your love beat for beat. So tell your parents or don't tell your parents, no matter how many stupid fights or problems we may have, know that I'm never going to stop loving you."

Now Jonas is in tears for a whole nother reason and I'm about to lose it myself, but I think maybe I should slip out of here before I do.

I try to move, but Kyle clamps his hand onto my shoulder. "I want you here for this, Carrots," he whispers to me without leaving room for much debate. Now officially completely overwhelmed, I let myself get twisted into a shared hug with the both of them. It takes a considerable length of time before any of us are ready to let go.

When, after another hour or so of talking, Jonas reluctantly mentions he needs to be getting home, Kyle doesn't fight it. For once. We do the goodbye hugs thing and then Kyle drives him home. Once he gets back, Kyle comes straight into my room and we sit together on my bed. He's at the foot, sitting sideways so his back's against the wall and his feet are hanging off the side of my bed. I'm where my pillow should be, also leaning against the wall, but lengthwise.

"That was really intense," I say after we've done the silent reflections thing for awhile. Kyle nods.

"I know," he smiles almost evilly. "Why'd you think I wanted you to stay? I figured if anything was going to make you feel again it'd be that bombardment of emotions," I shake my head.

"You're amazing, Kyle. I don't think I've ever given you enough credit for that. I really mean it." He smiles.

"I know you do, bro. And I love you too."

"Jonas is very lucky to have you," I figure I might as well just go for the whole hog while I'm on a roll. Who knows when the next time I'll feel this honest and present will be.

"I don't know about that," Kyle's seriously uncertain tone takes me by surprise, and not one of those pleasant ones.

"What?" He sighs, turning around a bit to look at me.

"It's just that all I ever seem to do is force out more stuff that ends up hurting him," This is the mystery of Kyle. Celery's the same way. These guys. They can be so incredible, say all the right things and put another

person so totally at ease, while the whole time, they're coming up with these insane self-incriminations. It's like they aren't happy unless they have something to feel guilty about.

"Kyle, how is it possible for you to be so amazing and also so insane?" I ask him in all sincerity. His mouth turns up in a confused half smile.

"Huh?"

"You're not hurting Jonas by digging his problems out and getting him to deal with them. After all the times you've said so to me, I should think you'd know that problems just get bigger when you try to hide from them. Remember when you were first trying to get me to admit my feelings to Celery? You used to say that everyday I let go by not telling him was just another day for my fear about it to grow bigger. You were the guy who taught me not to shove my fears in a box and try to forget about them. You've always been the one who busts in without hesitation and shines the light into the dark places in me. That's all you're doing for Jonas. And sure, it can hurt while it happens, but you're just doing what's necessary. I know I've always been better for it in the end."

"You don't think I sometimes push too far?"

"Well, you can, at times, be a little um, overenthusiastic." He rolls his eyes and grins self-deprecatingly.

"Just a little."

"No. Really. You aren't that bad. It's just like, when you see someone you love hurting over a part of themselves they aren't ready to deal with, you can't really stand it and you feel compelled to barrel in and fix things, even if you have to like break a few balls to get there."

I get no immediate response, but that's no big since I'm assuming he's spending this quiet time pondering my wisdom. Who said 'yeah right' sarcastically? I'll kick you!

"I think my cheer up speeches are better than yours," I grin.

"Yeah whatever, asshole."

It's pretty late by the time Kyle heads off to bed. I'm completely drained, and ready to crash, but I remember I have to call Celery. He picks up not even halfway through the second ring.

"I thought you'd forgotten about me," he teases with a slight edge.

"No chance of that happening," I promise him seriously to take care of the

edge. "There was a major drama fest though," I'm not really sure I have the juice to go through it all again.

"About you?"

"Not really, actually. It started out being me, but then I asked Jonas and Kyle what'd been going lately and things got kinda crazy."

" 'Cause of Jonas and his parents," Okay. Like, seriously. Enough is enough already.

"Did you know about this?"

"Well."

"You DID!"

"Some of it," he tries to appease me. "It's just like, I don't know, I could sort of tell. I don't know anything specific or recent, but we did talk about it once, before I moved. You know, as one kid who gets screwed over by his parents to another, that kind of thing."

"Oh I get it. And like, me and Kyle, we can't understand that 'cause we like our parents."

"I didn't mean it like that," he rebuts calmly. "Don't get all hostile."

"Sorry, my emotions are just like totally frayed."

"You're asking a lot of them so soon after such a long period without use."

"How do you put up with everything about me?" I wonder to him and myself.

"Love makes people crazy."

"So THAT'S what's wrong with us," he chuckles.

"Solved at last."

"Kyle calmed him down great, but then he freaked out himself after Jonas left."

"It runs in the family."

"Who, me?" Funny how it was him I compared Kyle to.

"Yes, you. You're the exact same in that way, you and Kyle." Damnit. He's right. Sort of. He's still the guilt queen, but I'm the after the fact

freaker-outer. Harrumph.

"Well, maybe," I do the pouty little boy voice thing.

"Did you fix him?" I believe facetious is the word I'm looking for in describing his tone.

"Yes," I reply grumpily. This is the most fun I've had in ages. Seriously.

"Well done."

"Thanks."

"Really though?"

"Yeah, that way too. They're both going to be okay, I think. Jonas still has to call Erica of course, who knows how that'll go. Badly, he predicts."

"Well sure. Who wants to hear their first love has not only moved on but with a member of the opposite sex?"

"The opposite sex?" Doesn't he mean the same sex?

"Well yeah, like, the opposite of her."

"Oh, I see what you mean."

"A little slow today, are we, baby?"

"Hey! It's been a rough day."

"It's been a looong day."

"I swear if you start to sing I'll kill you."

"Empty threats will get you nowhere."

"You're not singing anymore, are you?"

"You appear to be right." This may all seem very juvenile or stupid or whatever to you, but it's everything I've missed. Just us. Talking, joking around, being our stupid, regular selves.

"When am I not?"

"Um, do you want me to compile a formal list or should I just ramble off as many occasions as I can think of off the top of my head? Like, how much time you got?"

"Not much more if I'm going to continue to be subjected to this sort of shabby treatment."

"I'm sorry," he pouty baby voices it up.

"Make it up to me."

"How?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

"You have until Spring Break," that makes the breath catch in my throat. I wish he hadn't brought the distance up. Just when I was starting to forget about it for a few seconds.

"Yeah," I don't exactly keep my voice neutral.

"Don't be mad at me, baby, I just don't want us to turn into total zombies again once we get off the phone and have to be real again. We can do that together, can't we? Do we have to pretend like we aren't far away from each other every time we talk on the phone?"

"Well, maybe not every time," I say in a very little voice.

"You know what I mean though, right?"

"Yes," I admit with some hesitation. I do, I just don't necessarily like it.

"We may not like it, but for now, we do have to learn to live in this situation."

"And you say I'M like Kyle," I mutter. The thing about muttering over the phone is, the other person can usually end up hearing you.

"Carrots, please," he quietly begs. "I need you to be with me on this," I sigh and take a long time reconciling myself to it, but I eventually do.

"I know. I am."

"Thank you."

"I think it should probably be me saying that to you," I mention almost idly.

"Yeah well, either way. I'm just glad you're okay."

"It's been a long time, I'm out of practice."

"We both are. But we can do it, right?"

"Suppose."

"Care."

"Calm. We can and will. I mean, we'll try as hard as we can, and sometimes we'll fail, but I believe we already agreed that was okay. Are you really sure YOU'LL be okay? It's so much harder for you..."

"No. Well, sort of, it is, but don't worry about it," like right, "I'm not like totally shut off from the outside world - I can still get support from you and the whole damn crew when I need it, and then there's like Saul and everything," that kid's been really good for him. Someday I'm going to meet him, and I'm going to give him the hugging of his life.

"Okay."

"I love you, Carrots, saying so is the only way I can ever bear to end a conversation with you," I feel the exact same way.

"I know. Me too. Love you always and especially slash forever, Celery."

"Bye."

"Yeah, bye."

I rush in, "I'm going to call you tomorrow, okay?" Catching him just before he hangs up.

"Very," I wish you could have heard the joy in his voice that went into that little word. Hearing it makes me skyrocket into the clouds.

"Bye," I say dreamily.

"Love you."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Three
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Fri, 15 Aug 2003 19:40:07 -0500

The next day is a Monday, but when I go downstairs for breakfast in the morning, I have to do a double take and check my internal calendar. The kitchen's filled with family like I can't remember it being on a weekday since Kara was first starting school. I enter the kitchen not knowing what to expect as silence falls and all eyes look to me.

"Uh, hey everybody," I say uncertainly.

Mom's leaning against the counter, I think up until a minute ago she might have been packing Kara a lunch. Haven't seen that in years either. With the craziness of Mom and Dad's work schedules, lunches have been all about cafeteria food pretty much for as long as I can remember. Except for the occasional first day stuff and back in the early days, like grade one and two. After that you're on your own in this family.

"Hi sweetie," she says to me, and smiles. I smile back, but like, nervously.

"Are you back for real?" Jon asks bluntly, looking at me with a surprising amount of intensity. Waves of guilt threaten to knock me down, but I struggle against them. I go over to the table and crouch down on the floor at his feet.

"I'm back. I'm sorry for the way I've been acting," he nods.

"Okay," he stays sitting down but I stretch up and hug him. Then I knee over and hug Dave.

"I'm really sorry, guys," I tell them again. Dave smiles, Jon is a bit more reserved, but I guess I'm forgiven. I stand again.

"Why didn't you tell us you were so sad?" Kara asks, in the innocent manner I guess only such a young girl can. I smile.

"Probably 'cause I didn't want to admit that I was," she nods.

"But you're better now?" I nod. She smiles wide and, anticipating, I bend to catch her in an embrace. She's still all forest nymphy, so I can hold her easily. She wraps her little arms around my neck, and I secure her against me.

"Have you called Celery?" Mom asks after awhile.

I nod, still with Kara snuggled in my arms. I feel more pangs of guilt as I think about how quick the kid's growing up, me missing most of it, but deal by resolving to hang with her more. That Sue kid too if I can get her to stop being scared of me. All of them really. I'm going to do better at the whole brother/son thing from now on. I really am.

"Put Kara down for a minute," Dad instructs. Huh?

"Okay, ready, sis?" She nods and I place her gently back on her chair.

"Carrots--"

"Maybe he should sit down too," my mom cuts Dad off gently. Huh again.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"We're thinking about flying Celery in for the weekend, after your exams. You have a couple days off," I blink a few times. I let my jaw hang open. My brain frantically tries to push out some kind of response to this.

"What?" Well worth the wait.

"Or you could ever go down there if you wanted."

"Jonas and me would come along of course," Kyle makes sure I've got that little detail clear.

"I don't..." know what to say would be the rest of that. I figured it was fairly obvious though.

"Happy?" Mom teases. My head bobs up and down, mostly out of its own free will, as I stutter repeatedly, failing miserably at word formation.

"Can I call him right now?" I all but beg. I can't remember the last time I was this excited.

"He'll probably still be asleep," damnit. Stupid time zones.

"Fine. Ruin all my fun," I glare at Kyle.

"No one ever learns not to shoot the messenger," he said, shaking his head sadly.

"We can really do this? We can afford it and everything?" Mom and Dad nod, big smiles on both of their faces.

"When did you say he can come?"

"When you're done exams," they remind me, also, humour me. I mean, they did just tell me like five seconds ago. But the way my mind's racing, you'd think it happened hours ago.

This weekend. After my exams. That's days away. Did you hear me? DAYS!

"I don't suppose you'd just let me drop all the classes I have exams in so I can see him longer, would you?"

"Not even a little bit," Mom shoots down that dream pretty quick.

"Still, this is excellent," I grin at Jonas and Kyle. "What do we think of the road trip idea?" Kyle (our driver) shrugs.

"Well, it's January. And it's a long drive. I was thinking we could save the trip of road for Spring Break. I mean, that's what Spring Break's supposed to be all about, right? The open road and lots of drunk chicks?" I laugh.

"Check yes for the open road. None of us are in the market for the other thing anymore," Jonas sighs all mock sadly.

"Ah, the good old days."

"Shut-up. You never had it so good," Kyle says grumpily, hitting Jonas in the stomach with the back of his hand.

It being Monday and all, pretty soon after that, Jonas and I have to head off to school.

School. Yeah. I know I haven't exactly talked about it much lately, but there really hasn't been a lot to tell that's of the good variety, and this has been depressing enough as it is, so I figured I'd just spare you the unpleasant details. But, since I guess I'm going to have to tell you eventually anyway, it might as well be now.

Since Celery left, nothing's been the same. But after graciously accepting the giver of the most obvious statement of the year award, I actually have a point to get back to. It's more than just me personally that's changed. More than my like attitude and everything I mean. 'Cause that's starting to get back on track. I know we've done all this before, but really this time. Hopefully anyway. But the bad about school has been there since the first day back. It was there during my depressed empty like death period of September and October, it was there from Thanksgiving through Christmas when I was finally showing signs of life again, and it's there now.

I guess I never truly knew how much Celery looked after me. How much shit and just life garbage he managed to shield me from. There are so many assholes in the world. I'm serious. I had like no idea. I mean, sure, I knew some people sucked, but I had no idea how high the suck numbers were. Maybe it's a teenager thing or maybe it's a general humanity thing, but man. People are dumb and mean and really, really annoying. I think Celery just sort of made all that crap go away by being so awesome. Like his presence was enough to overpower and overshadow all that the jerk world had to offer. I'm on my own with the dealing with jerks now, and like most of the other on my own things, I'm not doing so great with it. I get a lot of extra flak now too. You know. 'Cause like, I'm alone or whatever. It's safe to make fun of me now that the constant threat of death by Celery is far from view. No one messes with me physically (and I guess I should be grateful for that) cause I guess his memory still inspires that degree of fear, but the verbal is pretty annoying. It's doesn't even like hurt me, it just pisses me off. And like, I'm dealing with enough anger as is it. It's not something I need more of on a daily basis. But thank goodness for Jonas and Kaleb 'cause if they weren't around, I swear, I would have snapped by now.

Adding to my current school-sucks frustration is the alone factor. Alone in the `available' sense. It's like, now that Celery's gone, I'm supposedly open for business or something. I feel really, really uncomfortable when people express non-platonic interest in me. But, at least with the couple guys that have sniffed around, I know where they're coming from. And Kaleb is on active duty, taking guys aside and letting them know it's not a good idea. I've seen him at work. Giving them the `I explored the places you are and I know you can return, please take my word' speech and sending them off on their way. So that's not my biggest problem.

It's girls. Evidently, Cherrie never really forgot about me as much as I thought she did. Actually going out with me again herself seems to be beneath her, but she like sends out scouts every once in awhile. Like they're testing the gay waters or something to see if the temperature's changed back to hetero.

I think it may be some kind of delayed revenge. Back when we did the fake dates thing and they dumped us, word sort of got around that the whole thing was a joke. The way me and Celery went straight back to being ultra affectionate right away didn't exactly help their rep. Both Cherrie and Meghan are too powerful to ever get too trashed by anyone, and their social standing is pretty much set in stone, but their time with us has become a blemish on their once flawless records. And maybe that's just not something Cherrie could forget, though god, it seems like a lifetime ago.

I have to give Cherrie credit though. She's figured out what bothers me most and now she's working it. I honestly prefer being called a faggot over having some girl put her hand on my shoulder and smile at me. I'm not

talking about normal, funny, cool, nice girls. 'Cause I don't want to sound like I'm this sexist girl-hating pig. I'm talking about the kind of girls who follow girls like Cherrie around and do everything they say. They're like even WORSE than the Cherrie and Meghans of the high school world. At least Cherrie thinks for herself. She's a twisted bitch, but she came into that on her own.

The further and final weirdness that is vexing me to date is the insane new kid I got stuck with for my lab partner in biology this term. You do know about terms, don't you? We have four a year, two every semester. Second term starts after Thanksgiving. Got that? No? Great. Anyway, the point was, I didn't get to choose mine this past term, like I did the first time around. Naturally I wanted to go with Jonas again, but like, so much for that dream. Apparently we have a reputation that proceeds us now. Like, no one even bothered to try and separate me and Celery in the classes we shared over the years 'cause they knew how utterly pointless it would be, but I guess Mrs. Shord figured she still had a chance with me and Jonas. That's how I ended up with this kid Colin Mayz.

You should know by now that as a rule I'm a lover of all that is weird and strange. But people who never talk, except to randomly blurt strange comments that make like NO sense whatsoever like once every three days, that

I can't deal with. Don't even look at me like that and say that sounds exactly like me. I'm not like that at all. For one thing, I talk all the time. And for another thing, shut up.

This Colin Mayz is like, not fun weird. He's, well, he's a weird I don't get. Sometimes he seems really happy and even like normal, but then, the random blurting. And I get this weird feeling he's getting like, frustrated or something. Like I'm supposed to be responding somehow I just totally haven't figured out yet and he's running out of patience. He gives me funny looks all the time too. Sometimes they're the ones of frustration and near annoyance, but other times, his eyes just full up with concern and empathy, and let me tell you, that freaks me out most of all. If he acted weird to me, but I still got a friendly vibe from him, maybe it'd be okay. But the vibe I get is something very different than a friendly one. It's not bad necessarily, just really confusing. Sometimes I almost feel like I've reached some kind of breakthrough, some epiphany moment, and then I'll lose it. It's like he'd this mystery I really want to solve, one I feel strangely compelled to try and solve, but that I just can't seem to.

The way he acts doesn't exactly help matters. Like today. I was just sitting in class minding my own business, trying to take notes and keep my head down, and out of nowhere (and I mean NOWHERE) Colin turns to me and goes,

"Have you ever thought about what it would be like to just fall asleep and

melt away?" in this bizarrely cheerful voice.

Who says stuff like that? I mean - come on! And give me a smile after that - something! Something to let me know it's some bizarre joke I just don't get. But no. All the weirdo did was turn around and go back to his work like nothing happened. I'm starting to wonder if he's like, insane. I mean, REALLY insane. Not in the joking around me way. Maybe it's all some bizarre cry for help, you know? 'Cause, something's definitely missing.

He never listens in class either. That's another beef I have with having him for a lab partner. We have to work together occasionally, you know? But all he does all through class is listen to music on his like tiny mp3 player with the super little ear pieces you can barely see. But like, it's obvious what he's doing. No one ever tries to stop him though, which is weird. The creepiest thing is that one time, I heard what he was listening too, and it was like, Christina Aguilera,. I swear. Scary, huh?

"Dude, are you spacing out again about that weird lab partner of yours?" Jonas and I are walking home at the moment. And as you well know, the answer to his question is yes.

I just shrug.

"What's up with him anyway? Is he like nice or what?"

"I honestly don't know what he is. So far the only category I've been able to label him under is weird and strange with repeated question marks."

"I heard he doesn't talk much."

"You heard right."

"That can be cool though, like, word is Celery was practically mute until like junior high," another bit of high school gossip proves true. So that's two at least in the history of teenage gossip.

"Again with the true. He was just so shy, plus he was all with the not liking anyone but me."

"It's a rough life," Jonas says with mock sympathy.

"Don't I know it."

"So getting back to your mysterious lab partner, have you at least tried to talk to him?" I did. It didn't go every well.

"Welll, see, I gave that a shot, didn't really work out."

"How so?"

"He threatened me with the pointy end of his compass," Jonas laughs. "I'm serious."

"I know. It's still funny," he's grinning.

"I wouldn't laugh if you'd gotten threatened with a sharp object."

"Sure you would," okay. So maybe I would.

"Let's move on."

"Afraid to admit it?"

"Quiet. I said we were moving on?" He's still smirking at me, but nevertheless. "Do you think it's all like, some kind of act? Maybe he's like really depressed or something."

"Maybe he's just weird," Jonas counters.

"Maybe people just bother him, so he acts totally freaky just to get them to leave him alone."

"Maybe he just likes to say strange stuff and listen to weird music."

"Maybe it's all a cover."

"Maybe you're both insane," can't argue with that.

"Do you think I should try talking to him again?" Jonas shrugs.

"I don't know, man. Do what you want. Maybe he'll turn out to be really cool. But prepare for him to stay a dick, okay? Not all of the strange and weird question mark people in the world are also the cool and fun to hang out with kind."

"I'll be sure to remember that advice."

"You do that."

Home doesn't take us much longer to get to, and when we do, Kyle's in the kitchen waiting for us with open arms. Well, the open arms are for Jonas, but the welcoming smile was for both of us.

"Hey guys, how was school?" Normally of course, that's not something Kyle would ask. But now that we're all admitting I'm not really okay and banding together to try to do something about that, that type of question is gonna

be asked.

"It was okay. Nothing spectacular, but okay." Kyle looks to Jonas to check my honesty.

"You don't have to do that," I protest softly in my own defence. Kyle smiles, sadness mixing in.

"Yeah I do," I sigh.

"It was fine, Kyle," Jonas says and gives me a little downward push, encouraging me to sit down. I suddenly feel very tired. School takes a lot out of me these days, especially now with the whole trying to be real again thing. Who knew expressing genuine emotion could take so much out of a guy.

"How about your crazy lab partner?" Colin's become something of a family legend. It was Jonas who first brought him up, but I figured faking aggravation about my often disturbing lab partner would be a good addition to my happiness act. Now I'll just have to give talking about him for real a try.

"He didn't say anything to me, okay, although when the teacher asked him a question he gave her a really blank look and said, `why did you ask me that? It's not as if you thought I was listening. You know I wasn't. You never do anything about it, so don't try to play some kind of power game with me. I don't know the answer. I didn't even hear the question. My deskmate here just poked me and I got the impression you were talking to me'."

"You remember all that?" I shrug.

"It kinda stuck in my mind, you know what I mean?" Kyle nods.

"What kind of tone did he use?"

"Well that was the weirdest part. He wasn't like hostile or anything. He was just stating facts, in a really normal, neutral voice, like he was giving a totally expected traditional answer."

Nobody says anything. We all just stare at each other, not really knowing how to keep talking about something none of us understand.

"Is anyone else like really weirded right now?" Jonas says. He's official moment breaker after all. I have a bit of trouble with it, but I smile. So does Kyle, a second after.

"There was a definite heavy and disturbing silence there for a minute."

"But it's better now, right?" Jonas has got the wonky uncertain grin.

"Yep," assures the still off-colour Kyle.

"Let's just, uh, do our work," Jonas suggests kinda helplessly. We do and eventually the weird mood goes away on its own.

In the evening I try to call Celery to tell him the awesomely good news, but he doesn't answer his cell. It freaks me out for a second or two before I realize he's probably just at basketball practice. His coach is like insane apparently. Like, a good guy and a good coach, but just very driven and like, pushes them hard. I don't think Celery minds though. It's something to keep him busy, at the very least.

I notice some puzzled looks. What's that? No don't tell me, I can guess. You don't know what I was talking about back there, do you? You're all scratching your heads going - good news? What good news? Well, get with the program. The good news about him getting to come here for a couple days at the end of the month. The good - we don't have to wait until March to see each other - news. You know, every once in awhile I feel like I'm making progress with you people, and then something like this happens. Honestly.

I call him back again later that night, at a time I'm sure he'll be back from practice and drum my fingers anxiously as I wait for him to pick up his cell. It takes longer than usual (two whole rings!)

"Hey, Carrots," he says without me ever identifying myself. Not that it's necessary.

"Hey, sweetness - guess what?" I jump right in without any of that like patience, masking the excitement in my voice thing.

"What?" I gotta say, he isn't sounding that enthused.

"Are you okay?"

"What? Sure," just weirdly distant and uninterested. Other than that, perfectly fine.

"Celery, is something wrong?"

"No. Didn't you have something to tell me?" Oh yeah, now pretend like you care.

"I did, but first I want to know what your problem is."

"I don't have a problem."

"Celery, you're lying to me. I can tell. You don't do it very well."

He sighs. And says nothing.

"Cel?"

"They told you, right?"

"Huh?"

"Your parents?"

"Told me what?" I've like completely lost track of this conversation.

"Well, why were you calling me? To tell me about my visit in at the end of the week, right?" Right... so why is this suddenly a BAD thing?

"Yeah, and I was really excited to tell you about it. I didn't know you knew."

"Well I do, they checked with me beforehand to see if I'd be okay with school and everything."

"Celery, why are you so... I don't know, like not excited? We get to see each other."

"We were going to see each other in March anyway."

"That's months away!" What the hell is going on?

"I know."

"So what the hell, Celery? Why don't you want to come?" 'Cause, basically, that's what this is boiling down to. He just really doesn't want to come. And it is beyond my depth to try to understand why.

"It's not that I don't want to, I just... I think it'd be better if I didn't."

"Is this the same shit as what stopped you from telling me about my parents' idea for me to move to Calgary with you in the summer?"

"Not exactly, I just think we need..."

"WHAT?" You'll notice I'm starting to get slightly upset.

"Baby, calm down, I don't want to fight."

"Then explain to me why the hell you don't want to see me as much as I want to see you," going from angry upset to sad whimpery upset. Not much of an improvement.

"Carrots, of course I want to see you. And if I knew I was going to at the end of the month, I'd be able to be blissfully happy the entire week no problem."

"So?" I don't know about you, but I still haven't spotted the problem.

"So I don't want that for either of us. Always just riding one high after another. We have to learn to stand on our own two feet a little, baby. Not just for ourselves, for the other people around us. We have to find happiness that doesn't come just from each other. Let's say I decided to come, and it put you in a great mood all week. So you'd be laughing and spending quality time with people, and everyone would be happy. But they'd know, baby, wouldn't they? Or they'd at least wonder. Wouldn't they wonder if you were happy 'cause I was coming or just plain happy? Happy to be with THEM? Valuing them as people? What about the twins, baby? You're their brother. They're just starting to think they've gotten you back, do you want to take that away from them? Another week of false happiness and then the aftermath of Christmas all over again once I'm gone? This is a bad cycle we've got going on, Care, someone has to break it."

"And you think this is the way to do it."

"It's the only way I can think of."

"So why does it get to be only your decision? Why don't I get a say in all this? It's my life you're making decisions about, Celery. Telling me what's best for me. I want you here. That's what I need for me to be happy. I don't think there's anything wrong with that." I'm fuming, and this close to breaking down.

"You don't understand--"

"You're right. I don't. I don't understand how you could do this," I choke on the words. "You're... you don't, I just can't--"

"Care," he pleads.

"No." Pulling myself together, well, sort of. Shutting off is more like it.

"I can't deal with it. I can't even think. But it's fine. You don't have to come. I'm not going to pressure you. I'm hanging up now, Celery," and I do, cutting off his protests half voiced.

Kyle comes in a few minutes later, looking extremely concerned.

"Are you okay?"

"We heard yelling," Jonas is with him.

I don't reply. They watch me stare at the phone.

"Were you talking to Celery?" I nod.

"What happened?" Jonas this time.

"He's not coming," dead.

"What?"

"He isn't coming. He doesn't want to."

"What do you mean? Didn't he explain anything? I'm sure that's not what he meant."

"It's what he meant," I assure them.

"Couldn't you, like, talk about it?"

"I hung up."

"What?"

"You hung up on Celery?" Kyle is stricken.

"Yeah."

"Carrots, talk to us," Jonas begs when I say nothing more.

"No," They look at each other, helplessly.

"I'm sorry, guys. But I can't. I just need to be alone."

Jonas raises his eyebrows in a very `that's the last thing you need' sort of way, but Kyle places a hand his shoulder and starts steering Jonas out of the room.

"We're here if you need us, Care," he adds, just before they leave.

Again, I make no response.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Four
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
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The next day I'm in a daze, still very much shaken from the events of the previous evening. Fighting in itself isn't something I'm used to with Celery (or anyone really) but to be fighting in an ongoing manner. I mean, he called back and we talked more but still I don't feel any better. Still there are the bad feelings and the anger. Still we are in total and bitter disagreement. At breakfast I got treated with kid gloves like I've never seen. Everyone (a bigger everyone than normal, one that included my mom, Kara, and the twins) tried to be cheerful and upbeat, but they all shot worried and anxious glances at me when they thought I wasn't looking.

Now in class I'm barely aware, but it's a different kind of not here. I'm not a mix of miserable and dead over missing Celery. I'm a million things at once, feeling almost every emotion you can think of (of the bad and even still some of the good varieties) and it's like collectively all these different emotions form this one loud continuous noise in my head and by trying to think of everything I really end up thinking of nothing.

And right now, sitting beside him as he listens to Avril Lavigne with his eyes half rolled back in his head, this blank and vacant look on his face, I feel very close to Colin. Like I finally get what's going on there. It's not nothing, up there inside his head, it's too much. I'm also starting to get pretty sure he's rockin' to her basest guitar for the irony. I'm honestly starting to see Colin in a totally different light. And I think I know how to reach him.

"Hey, my name's Carrots. You want to be my friend?" I'm holding my hand out in front of his face, going not with the stupid grin but rather a genuine half-smile.

To my considerable surprise and jubilation, he grins.

"Took you long enough, asshole. Here I am, the coolest person you know, and I've been sitting beside you for months and you finally get around to noticing. I mean, man, I thought I was going to have to keep listening to this crap for the rest of my life before you figured out any of this shit. The most frightening thing about all this is the music's so bad I've started to love it. I'm all over the terrible pop music scene now. And I blame you."

There's no doubt about it what I just felt was a thrill of horror. (Harry Potter thing, very funny.) But not really horror in the bad way, just, so much shock that it adds up to horror. 'Cause, that speech, well, it was mine. As I was hearing it, all I could think of was that this was a speech inside of me I was never meant to say. It's like suddenly and probably totally insanely I'm seeing this whole unrealized side of myself reflected out of Colin. And in a way that Kaleb sometimes almost was and Celery could often manage to be, Colin is me. A mean, a me I know I'll never be, but easily could have become, if my life up until this point had been very different.

"Pretty trippy, eh?" He breaks through my introspection, grinning even more with a knowing gleam in his eye.

"How did you know?" I venture to ask, feeling strangely calm. Colin shrugs.

"I didn't at first, but for some reason I couldn't explain I found myself watching you anyway. Giving you that bit of attention it didn't take me long to understand who you were. It was in everything you did from the way you interact with your pals to how you handled me and my infinitely bizarre behaviour. When I started throwing you the occasional burst of totally random insanity and you still managed to be at least mildly cool to me, I knew for sure. You are a version of my own self, separate and totally unique because of your circumstances and past but with a core of fundamental sameness I recognized almost instantly. I think, had you not been in a whatever kind of pain that's been eating you alive inside for what's obviously been quite awhile now but recently seemed to get a lot worse, you would have been able to spot me a lot sooner yourself."

This is all so bizarre. I mean, don't think I'm not aware of that fact. It hasn't escaped my understanding. But most bizarre of all is how natural it feels. How easily I'm accepting it all, with how little difficulty I've accepted the fact that Colin and I have this strange and unexpected bond slash connection thing.

"I guess I'm going to have to tell you about that," 'cause, as completely insane as it sounds, I've had no time to stop and question the idea that we'll be telling each other everything. It just seems to be obvious and

something that's understood.

Colin is nodding so I guess that means I was right.

"There's a lot we have to tell each other, and we could start now if you wanted to keep talking, which would probably get us kicked out of class and we could continue this outside in the hallway. But I'm guessing you want to hear the review for the exam tomorrow, am I right?"

"Yeah," he smiles.

"Enjoy yourself."

"You too." I reply just before he goes back under the headphones.

Just before he disappears out into the hallway after the bell rings, Colin grins at me and says,

"Rock on. Rock on. Peace out. Avril."

I stare at him in disbelief and confusion, making Colin laugh and shake his head. He riffles through his bag and grabs a CD.

"Listen to the CD, read the liner notes, and then we can be friends."

I take it and look at what CD it is. "Let Go" by none other than Avril Lavigne herself. Should have known.

"See you later, man," I say, with a chuckle in my voice. He salutes and slips out of the classroom.

I stare down at the CD. As wack as it is, I get this too. It's a part of his language. I've got to get myself up to speed. Before we can really talk I need to become fluent in Colin and he'll be required to learn Carrots and Celery. (As much as things aren't right with us, it's not a language that's just mine and I can't exclude him from my thoughts, as much as thinking about Celery hurts and confuses me right now.)

Suddenly I jump, surprised to feel someone's hand on my shoulder.

"What was that all about?" It's Jonas. I shrug.

"No more question mark. He's been officially placed in the weird and strange in a good way column." Jonas doesn't exactly look convinced, but he doesn't say anything more about it.

That night, studying and taking breaks to listen to Avril Lavigne, I understand it all. I mean, "Let Go" may very well be the most hilarious CD

I've ever listened to, but the real joy comes from the CD itself, and the CD packaging. The liner notes should go down as the best ones in the history of liner notes, and even the song lyrics are priceless. Like, everything is handwritten, with words crossed out, all scruffy, like Avril actually wrote the songs herself. It's too much fun.

Kyle storms in around nine, with Jonas not far behind.

"Were you just listening to Avril Lavigne?" he demands with a face of horrified disbelief.

"2 words: tour bus." More code from the liner notes.

"What the hell does THAT mean?"

"It means yes. Now shoo. I'm trying to study," mostly because of the stunned, Kyle does as I say. Jonas stands in the doorway a minute longer, disgust slowly mutating into concern.

"Are you okay?" I nod.

"I'm unconsolated, lonely, I am, so much better than I used to be," the familiarness of these Weakerthans lyrics comforts Jonas and he gives me a weak smile before leaving the room.

I turn Avril back on, have another chuckle about something in the liner notes, and go back to studying.

I kill on my Bio exam, despite having Skater Boi stuck in my head the entire time. Because I've got Law tomorrow and I really need to cram for it, I go straight home and actually manage to do the hardcore study thing for most of the afternoon (all my exams happen to be in the morning this semester).

After my Law exam I mean to wait around and then hook up with Jonas, but when Colin passes by me on the way out of his Chem exam we get to talking (and laughing) about all things Avril, and in a very spur of the moment thing, decide to go hang out at his house.

When we get there I give him a lot of shit about his music selections, but as I intended, Colin is completely unfazed, stating,

"Buddy, you haven't laughed until you've laughed at the lyrics of truly bad pop music. I know you've got like your cheesy movie thing or whatever, and I can be down with that, but you have GOT to start appreciating boy band members solo projects and manufactured, poser punk. Not to mention the seeming endless supply of long brown haired girls who play either the guitar or the piano. It's life done right."

"I'm preparing myself to become one with the cheesy pop music, I'm reading my heart to open itself to Justin Timberlake and Vanessa Carlton," he smiles approvingly.

"There's hope for you yet."

After taking in almost the entire Justified (do I even have to point out how hilarious it is he called his CD Justified?) experience, we get down to some serious talking. Somewhere between Cry Me a River and whatever, we got into our current positions. Sitting back to back on his bed, leaning against each other for support.

"So tell me about yourself, man," Colin instructs.

"What'd you wanna know?"

"Tell me about why you've been so sad. Does it have anything to do with that Celery person whose name you've got tattooed on your wrist?"
Hmmm. Celery `person`. Does that mean he doesn't know I'm gay? Is he? Do I want him to be?

"Just answer the question, man," he says calmly. "Don't freak out on me." I take a breath.

"It has everything to do with Celery." I sigh, pushing up my sleeve to look at my arm. Trace the letters in his name.

"We were best friends, all through elementary school and junior high. The intense, exclusive, inseparable kind of friends. We always did everything together. Even though we have really different interests. We found ways to always share everything. He was always over at my house, because he has this like totally non-existent family unit - a mother and stepfather who honestly couldn't care less if he lived or died - except to consider how it would affect their social standing. They're like pure evil. Anyway, we were always really close. I was about 12 when I started to get feelings for him that were less than platonic. I was in love with him, totally. I never questioned it, though I wasn't exactly a picture of grace about the whole thing."

I'm quiet, half lost in memory, but Colin doesn't speak. He must get I haven't stopped, just that I'm taking a break to collect myself a little.

"It was the natural course of events I guess. I mean, with how incredibly close we were, that and my total and obvious gayness," I sigh, "I don't have to ask if you're okay with that, do I?"

"No," It's weird but the way he says it, I know two things. One, that's he's totally okay with it, and two, that's he's totally straight. It may

sound weird, but I just know.

"I didn't think so. Anyway, I spent 12 and on madly and secretly in love with my best friend. And even though I was slowly coming to the realization that he was going through the exact same thing, I never said anything."

"Until?"

"March of last year. I heard him say he loved me in his sleep, and that combined with a very enlightening conversation I had with my older brother was enough to finally get me off my chicken ass and I told him I was in love with him."

"How'd he take it?"

"Practically burst into tears and told me the same."

"So why the sad? You talk about him with so much love in your voice, and yet there's this bitter sweetness, this great big cloud of misery over all of it. Did you break up?" Break up? Is that what we've done?

"No," to both of us. "He had to move, to Calgary. I miss him. I miss him so much I can't function a lot of the time. I worry my family and my other friends, I shut myself off, feel nothing to avoid the pain. I was supposed to be getting better, after he came to visit over Thanksgiving, but it all came crashing down again this month once he left after Christmas break."

"That's when you were doing the pretend to be happy thing?"

"You could tell?"

"You're me. I knew what I was seeing was just a shadow of who you really are. I was just afraid there wasn't going to be any way to restore you to your former glory. But then yesterday you seemed to have come alive again, it was like seeing you for the first time."

"He was supposed to come for a visit after exams this week..

"The light's gone off again."

"He isn't coming," the deadness creeps back into my voice.

"Why not?"

I still don't understand all of this, not really, but something about Colin makes it easy to tell him.

"That's pretty fucked up." Colin concludes when I'm done.

"I know," I say in a desperate sort of way. "Do you think I'm being insane?"

"I think I'd be feeling the exact same thing if I was in your place," I laugh.

"That doesn't help me," I've already noticed that Colin does this thing where he breathes audibly out of his nose before certain types of smiles, and I hear one of those now.

"I'd say that for one thing I probably don't know enough about this situation to really take a clear side or make judgments, but I will give you my basic impression. As I see it, you're both acting the only way you feel you're able, you in your inability to accept his reasons and Celery in his while slightly skewed but genuine desire to make things better for you and your whole family. Like you I'm not sure how it's possible for him to continue to see himself as a burden or some kind of negative force in your life, but I'm guessing it has something to do with how he was raised. So clearly unwanted by the people who are supposed to care about him the most, growing up somewhere the people make it common knowledge he's not welcome. So I think I understand at least partly where each of you is coming from, and I get your feelings and I'm not sure he's doing the right thing for the totally right reasons, but that aside, I'm not sure if he's totally off base."

"What?!"

"Steady. Don't go nuts. This is just my personal opinion, coming from the world as I see it. The thing about me that makes me the most different from you is that I'm alone and fundamentally you are not. At the moment you are - physically at least - but you grew up your whole life in a unit, experiencing life in a totally different way than I have. You've chosen to define yourself as a member of that unit instead of as an individual. I've always been the opposite. I've been especially conscious and deliberate about doing that since I got into public school for high school."

"Public schooling?" It's funny, we feel so comfortable together, and we're talking as if we know one another, but really we don't yet.

"Yeah. I was home schooled up until that point. S'why I never listen in class. I can't learn that way. I prefer to be independent and learn on my own. My dad put me in public school because he thought I was too introverted and wanted me to develop some like social skills but I kept getting tossed."

"For what?"

"Same stuff I do here - listening to music in class, exhibiting what has been referred to as an insubordinate, anarchist attitude to the teachers. I was actually once given the boot for 'not integrating well with his fellow classmates'. That was in grade nine. I never talked and to anyone really and when I did, apparently I was a little hard to take," he says breezily.

"You?" I feign disbelief.

"Shut-up. Anyway, dear old dad finally found our school and was able to make some special arrangements. I took most of 11 off after the first two months and my expulsion from yet another fine institution of learning, but dad wanted me to like, graduate with other people. Do the cap and gown, thanks for the memories thing."

"Not the biggest fan of the idea?"

"It matters to him more than it does me. I know that basically he just wants me to be happy, and it worries him I've never really shown as much interest in friends my own age as I have in reading and listening in on conversations crazy old people have in the library. As for the high school experience, I'm not getting much out of it education-wise, but I do like watching people. High school students can be highly entertaining."

"Yeah I guess we can be."

"I didn't mean you," I smile.

"It's okay. We understand each other. That's not just a one way thing, don't forget." He grins, sheepish.

"I'm used to understanding people, watching them from a distance and figuring them out. I'm not so used to getting that back," I reach my hand backwards so I can squeeze his shoulder. No music is playing, and for awhile we sit in silence.

"Not that I didn't find that all very interesting, but didn't we start off talking about something else?"

"Yeah. Your stuff with Celery and the fact that he's opted out of the end of January weekend of fun and your subsequent lack of communication."

"Oh yeah. And you were telling me you didn't think that was nearly as insane as it so obviously is - and why."

"Right, right. It's all coming back to me now. Being independent, or choosing to exist in a unit. I think depending on the person, both of these can be good options. It's just, the choice I've made gives me a very different perspective than you. The way I see it, it's important to know

yourself. That's always been my like beef with intense high school relationships. There's still so much growing and changing left for people to do in their late teens, and I guess it's never really made sense to me why people would go off and commit themselves to one person they felt close to in a moment when they still had so much changing left to do. So that's all I'm trying to say to you, Carrots, this could be a good time for both of you to grow as individuals. If you really love each other, you should still grow into a person the other will love and fit with. I certainly don't think Celery is motivated in any other way."

"Maybe you're right, but I'm not really ready to stop being stupid and stubborn about this yet. I know I'll have to eventually, but I'm not quite ready to let these feelings go. I'm still so confused."

"The only way to truly figure anything out is to talk to him. That's the only way you'll stop misunderstanding each other and taking things the wrong way," I sigh.

"It's not that I don't think you're right," he nods.

"Yeah. I know. You need time, just don't take too much, okay? Remember that this is hurting both of you," he's known me like a day and the guy already knows exactly what to say to get to me.

"This is kind of spooky," he smiles (and again I know this cause of the nose thing), understanding what I mean.

"We'll get used to it," I smile too, though I'm not sure he has any similar sort of way of knowing.

"Yeah. I guess we will. I want you to know that I'm like, really glad you're--"

"Say no more."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Five
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Thu, 28 Aug 2003 15:19:23 -0500

Friday night and finally an end to a very strange week. Such a range of emotions (strange in itself and odd just to be experiencing them again) and experiences. Exams, the ongoing first ever extended fight with Celery, discovering my straight doppelganger. Jonas and Kyle have their own problems so I haven't been seeing them much. As I was leaving my final exam (English) I bumped into Colin and he told me to expect him over around 7. We never made plans to hang out or anything but it didn't really surprise me or strike me as odd in any way. Making such announcements seems to be the kind of thing I'd do in his place. The inviting himself over is also like me.

It's 7:15 and he's still not there, but I didn't think he'd arrive until 7:30 so in a weird way, it doesn't FEEL like he's late.

Colin shows up at exactly 7:29 and I try to adopt a Frodo Baggins-like look of disapproval, folding my arms.

"You're late." Colin smiles, rolls his eyes and cocks his head.

"Are you really going to make me be Colin the Grey?" More like Colin the dirty blond, but hey, he picked up on the reference. I just keep standing there with my arms folded across my chest.

Colin sighs.

"Fine - a wizard is never late. Nor is he early. He arrives exactly when he means to." I laugh and we share a quick, ultra-hetero, manly, one arm each, hug. 'Cause hey, that's what happens in the movie. You've gotta do these things right.

"Let's go upstairs. None of my family seems to be home but I've got the best CD player and I'm going to force you to listen to all of Once More With Feeling." He groans.

"Isn't that the fucking Buffy the Vampire Slayer soundtrack?"

"Something like that. My little brothers gave it to me for Christmas as a joke, but I've been too depressed to listen to it," he reaches over and gives me a supportive slug in the shoulder.

"I'm not exactly alive with desire to hear what's-her-name sing about bunnies, but if it's a sign of your improving mood, I'm all for it," I smile gratefully.

This is a big part of why I love hanging out with Colin so much. It never feels like there's any pressure. We're always both so relaxed and oddly open when we're together. I feel safe with him, and it's a different kind of safe than with Celery, or even Kyle and Jonas. I feel like I can trust Colin to know my limits, simply because that freaky connection thing of ours tends to mean he has the same ones as me. And I mean, listen to me. We've only hung out twice. But it already feels like we've got this rhythm, this ease.

I push open the door to my room and the first thing Colin does is chuckle at my roomy double bed.

"That's convenient." I nod.

"Yeah. When my parents presented it to me at 15 I didn't for a second comprehend what they meant it for, but now, looking back, I can see they were basically saying, 'Here you go. Use it well'. It's obvious to me now they meant it for the both of us."

"And you didn't even start taking advantage until over a year later," shakes his head, eyes glowing mischievously.

"Pretty much. But we had to go at our own pace I guess."

"Didn't it drive you crazy though? I mean, honestly? Weren't you like, well, incredibly frustrated?"

"Frustrated? Like about not being able to tell him how I felt?" Didn't we already cover that?

"Well, that, but I kinda meant more along the lines of being like sexually frustrated," Colin shrugs.

Amazingly, I don't even blush.

"Dude, of course I was. I mean, Celery is my ideal - and I certainly don't mean that just emotionally. He's fucking hot. I spent the first couple years of puberty half crazy wanting him."

"And the other half of you was crazy from other stuff."

"Quiet, you," I say, smacking his shoulder.

"Throw on some tunes." Colin tells me, sitting down on my bed.

I put Once More in and sit down with my back to Colin. We inch our way closer until we're resting comfortably against each other back to back. I

spend most of the time explaining to him what was happening in the show during each particular song, which keeps me occupied enough that I don't have to cry. Still I get flooded with memories of Celery. We haven't talked since Monday night.

When the CD ends, Colin starts asking me questions about Celery again. Early stuff mostly. History and all that. Again, I find it all strangely easy to tell him. We get down to some more business about him too. I hear more about Colin's childhood, the way his mother just wasn't there one day when he came home from the babysitter when he was five years old, the way she never came back and how he's still trying to deal with that, his closeness with his father. He gives me more details about his adventures in public schooling. I can totally see how all that would have been quite traumatic to have experienced in the moment, but it gives us both lots of laughs as we discuss it now.

Whenever we get back to talking about me and Celery, Colin continues to gently encourage me to work out my feelings and start talking to him again. I make the lame argument about phones working both ways, but Colin quickly shuts that down.

"He's obviously afraid to. Both times he tried to explain what he was feeling you got really hurt and upset. From what you've told me of the guy, I'm thinking those are about his least favourite things to do to you."

"Time."

"Yeah, sure." He eases off.

"What about you though?" Curious about that side of him.

"Huh? What about me what?"

"Like, romance, love and everything. What's that been like for you?" I feel his shrug.

"Nothing like you, as I believe I've mentioned. I've had crushes I suppose, just the typical, juvenile adolescent kind. I don't really like a lot of people, liking someone enough to want to like, date them, or even go so far as to one day love them, there's been none of that as of yet. People are so like, I don't know, stupid most of the time. Immature and all that. Not that I'm not, I just have a higher tolerance for it in myself than I do with other people." I chuckle.

"So that's it? No serious like crushes? No love skeletons in your closet?"

"Nope." And yet, somehow I don't believe him.

"Colin, man, don't hold back on me," I say, only half teasing.

"It's nothing."

"Dude, I've given you like my whole life story. Angst, pain, delirious moments and all. This is not a one sided deal, may I remind you."

"It's sort of out there."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, I don't know, soap opera-ish."

"Okay, you can't stop now, I'm insanely curious and totally confused."

"No, really, Carrots. It's nothing you want to hear about."

"Colin, there's no way you're not telling me. Like come on, if you don't trust me back, then we've got nothing. And I don't want this to be nothing. You've gotta show me I haven't been wrong opening up to you like I have." He sighs heavily.

"Okay look, I'll tell you, but you have to promise not to get all weird on me. It's not a big deal. I mean, it sounds like really dire and like, after school special meets Dawson's Creek meets Law and Order or whatever, but it's really not anything that big. It's just something that happened to me once. It's part of who I am like everything in the past is, but it's by no means everything I am. I don't let it define me, and I don't let NOT letting it define me define me either, if that makes any sense. I'm just saying, I don't spend my life obsessing about it, and I don't want you to either."

"Just tell me, I promise not to judge you, or act all 'oh my god that's like so totally' or whatever. Just trust me." He sighs again, doing the mental preparation thing, and then begins.

"When I was 15, an old friend of my dad's came to stay with us for the summer, him and his wife."

"And?" when he doesn't continue.

"And I guess I sort of had an affair with her," he says it very offhandedly, very blas .

"What?!" I'm like, stunned. So much for my promise not to overreact.

"You're freaked," he sighs regretfully, turning to face me.

"No, I just..." He smiles.

"Get why I'm kind of down on serious relationships?"

"What happened? I mean, it's over, right?" He laughs, not even especially bitterly.

"Very much so. It was just a summer fling. You know, she was bored and like, I guess wanted to do this one crazy thing, maybe get back at her husband a little. I was just like there at the right place, right time."

"That's all it was to you too?" Somehow I doubt that, despite how he's acting.

His face grows much more serious.

"No. I was naive, I sort of let myself believe we were in love. I swallowed all the lies she told me about how awful her husband was, about how she really wanted to leave him for me, but she was just so afraid, so worried it wouldn't be the right thing for me and I'd end up resenting her."

"That's sounds awful." He smiles, with a faraway look in his eye.

"In some ways it was. But like I said, I don't let it have a whole lot of power over me. It was just something that happened, that's all. She wasn't a bad person. Not really. Just really frustrated, angry at her husband, looking for a distraction. And maybe she did care for me a little, in the same twisted way I did for her. For me, a lot of it was confusing sex for love. That's a really easy thing to do when you're 15 in my experience anyway.

For her, I don't know. I think sometimes she almost believed the stuff she told me, you know, about us being in love, her wanting to be with me if only there was some way. She was desperate, and it was long time since her husband had shown her any affection. I guess she just used me as some kind of substitute. After it all came out at the end of the summer in some drunken argument she had with my father, they left. I heard she got divorced a few months later, but we've never spoken.

My dad wanted me to go into counselling, and I did, for awhile, but it never really changed anything. Jeanine is just a fact in my past. She's part of who I am, what made me who I am, and I'm not especially unhappy with myself. I see now what I felt for her wasn't even close to love, and I've long stopped deluding myself into thinking she felt love for me. No one ever believes me when I tell them this, but I'm really past it. It was almost three years ago anyway."

"Still, I mean..."

"I don't want you to feel sorry for me. I'm just a guy, a normally abnormal one. And we're pals, so be a pal and don't go all weird on me and treat me all delicately now. I'm still your weird lab partner guy, now you just understand a little better how I got to be the weird guy that I am. I think you liked that guy, so just stay cool, okay?"

I nod.

"Sure, I just like, I'm here for you or whatever, if you want to talk about it more sometime. That both ways thing again, you know?" He smiles, I think gratefully.

"Yeah, I think I'm finally getting that."

Colin and I continue to hang out, and we rapidly become very close. Most of what we're about is laughing together, and just hanging out like buds do, nothing too heavy, but we've got the like silent understanding thing. We know that if more serious things need to be discussed, we'll be able to handle that too. All our deep conversations at the beginning have left very little room for reticence and being shy.

We've found lots of other ways that our personalities seem to blur together, but we've come up with a revised look at our connection. Colin worded it best a couple nights ago when we were just chilling, watching gag after gag worthy video on MUCH.

"Dude, I think I've changed my mind about you and me." I smiled.

"Yeah, you don't want to be pals anymore?" Knowing that wasn't it.

"You're an idiot. And also no. I've been thinking about it, and I don't think we're like exactly each other, I think it's more like we're opposites."

"Opposites?"

"Yeah, like, we've got that fundamental like each other thing going on, so we're still like the same coin, but just like the opposite sides, you know?"

" 'Cause of all our different experiences and shit?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds strangely logical in the insane way everything else about the way we've hooked up has."

"Your vote of confidence is overwhelming," right away, I welled up with tears.

"I'm sorry, man, that wasn't supposed to make you cry," he says with a touch of humour and a healthy dose of confusion, but takes me into a hug.

"It's okay," I say, trying to pull myself together.

I'm crying, if you haven't figured it out, because that thing Colin just said up there is basically a Princess Bride quote (though I don't think he knew it), and I've been really shaky and emotionally volatile concerning everything that reminds me of Celery.

"Something about Celery?" I nod.

"Yeah." In a really pitiful voice.

"You've got to call him, man," he says, and I know it's true.

"I just can't yet." His eyes are sad.

"Just make sure you don't leave it so long you're calling too late," which is both good advice, and partly a line from a very depressing song by Dashboard Confessionals called the Best Deceptions.

My batting average in fights on the issue with Colin does not improve in the days that follow, due to his freaky Celery-like ability to cut through every single one of my arguments and rationales. Also, it's been widely recognized that I'm being an idiot. As a result of this, here's me, mustering courage and swallowing pride, getting ready to dial that number years of concentrating on nothing else would never let me forget. And honestly, it's probably got more to do with the fact that I can practically feel my insides shrinking up and dying, just from missing hearing his voice, than Colin's debating skills.

I finally manage to marshal enough of all the things I need in order for it to be possible, and I dial the numbers.

"Carrots?" his voice asks hesitantly after he picks half-way through the second ring.

"I love you, Celery." He lets out a shuddering sigh of relief. "I didn't understand. I was too mad and confused to even let myself try to understand. Maybe I still don't totally - but I do understand how that

you're acting, it's not out of the desire to hurt me, or like, pull away from me."

"Of course not!" He seems horrified and shocked.

"Okay, well, I'm just saying that was basically my problem. I couldn't see past what you were saying or even really hear you. Not enough to see what you were really trying to do. Which I finally see was just makes things better."

"I love you, Carrots. So much that sometimes, I get really stupid. I think you know what I'm talking about," a smile finds its way onto my lips. "I got the idea in my head that what I was doing was right, and I couldn't stop to consider anything else. I guess I wasn't hearing you very well either. But please never think what I'm doing is trying to get away from you. Never think I want anything more than I want to be with you. You're my heart and I love you. I just can't always be so fucking selfish. I can't love you so much that it blocks out everyone else. It's just not fair to them and it's not fair to you. But I love you, in case you missed it the first millions times I've said it to you. And, I always, always will." I whimper slightly.

"I love you too - but there's just one thing I still don't understand - can't understand."

"What?" he asks gently.

"I want so badly for you to be holding me right now. I want it like it's the only thing that matters in the world and I don't understand why that's a thing I'm supposed to not be feeling."

"That's not - you are!" He falters and inhales sharply. "I want the same thing, baby, I don't mean we have to love each other less, or stop wanting each other or anything." He sighs shakily. "It's like Jonas said," his voice returns sounding strangely calm.

"Jonas?"

"Yeah. Back in the day, when we were first starting to be friends. It's not that our connection has to weaken, it's not that we're starting meaning less to each other. We're just opening ourselves up. Letting other people in. I love you, I want to see you happy. I need to be able to see you with friends, I need to learn to see you having fun with other people and not feel threatened. Our love for each other doesn't go away, it doesn't even have to diminish, but it may have to change. Just a little, to make sure it's REAL love. The kind that isn't jealous and controlling. It's like that verse in the Bible, you know? I don't know about the rest of that thing, but I'm pretty sure whoever wrote that part - I think maybe it was that

dude Paul - got the love thing right. You know, love is patient, love is kind, all that good stuff. That's what I want for us. I want us to be sure that's the way we love each other."

Always thinking ahead, always judging situations and using both his heart and his mind. My husband, my best friend. My beautiful idiot.

"I want that too. But you have to understand something too, Celery - okay?"

"Okay."

"I think it's good, what you were trying to do. I think it's necessary even. But you can't decide stuff like that just by yourself. You don't get to make all the decisions for both of us. That's not how it works. Know what I mean? I don't mind," I sigh, "I know in the past I've left a lot of stuff up to you, or that somehow, I've just gone along with a lot of stuff, but it can't work like that, especially now. So I'm saying, yeah, I understand what you were doing, and I'm not really mad anymore but I was, and I feel I had a right to be. No more unilateral decisions like that one, okay?"

"Okay," he whispers, sounding a little taken aback.

"I'm serious about this, Celery. I'm not trying to be a bastard or anything, and I love you very much, but you can't control me. You said you wanted to make sure our love was the patient, kind, not jealous and controlling kind? Well, make sure you mean that, make sure it goes both ways."

"Carrots, I'm... you're right. I did it all wrong."

"It could just as easily have been me, but I don't want either of us making mistakes like that. That's sort of the point."

"I get it. I'm with you 100% on this."

"Good." I'm feeling a little shaky. I'm not used to being take charge guy like that.

"I love you."

"Love you too, always."

"I'm sorry," he says quietly.

"It's... well, not forgotten, because that sort of defeats the purpose, but forgiven, Cel. It's forgiven. Like I said, it's not like you're the only one with the capacity to screw up."

I hear a soft chuckle.

"I guess."

"Just one more thing, this is just for now, right? You are still coming for Spring Break, right?" Almost able to say it teasingly.

"Try and stop me," Celery says fiercely. Exactly what I needed to hear to become fully alright again.

I sigh steadily, mind made up.

"Okay. I can do this. I can be okay. I can accept this. I can be happy, recognizing all the wonderful people in my life, still missing you, but dealing 'cause I'll know you're okay. You are okay - aren't you?"

"I'm feeling pretty great right now."

"Good. Is that it then? Should we say bye for now?"

"And definitely come back in awhile," it's lame, but it's also comforting, which is what's more important to me.

"Yep. Love you."

"Love you too, Carrots."

"Bye."

"Yeah."

When I get off the phone, I find myself feeling strangely energetic, like I'm filled with purpose. I feel like I want to, just, like, hang out with people. I want to be with them for them and show them I can have a good time doing it. I've got the like, thirst to prove myself.

go down to the living room, and find Mom and Dad reading together. I watch them for awhile from the doorway, but they seem to be enjoying a private time together, so I sneak away without announcing myself.

Next I try Kyle's place, but he's alone studying. We talk for a few minutes, and I can feel Kyle trying to keep the conversation going, but knowing that's mostly out of the desire for an excuse to get out of studying, I don't linger very long.

Finally, I knock on the twins' door.

"Hey," Jon says, opening up and looking at me strangely.

"Hi," I say, smiling.

Dave's head pops up over Jon's shoulder.

"Do you want something?" he asks.

"I was just like, wondering what you guys were up to." They look at each other, and share some silent communication, and then turn back to me, still with blank faces.

"Just playing video games," Jon begins.

"Why?" Dave wraps up.

"I don't know, I thought we could hang out, if you wanted." They smile.

"Sure."

So I go in, and it strikes me as very strange when I think about how long it's been since I've been in their room. Months probably. It's quite their own private world, and none of us really go in there much, but with the way I've been acting lately, that's been an extreme case.

They have bunk beds, though the room could easily fit two normal ones in addition to the old couch they so greatly covet. It used to be in the living room, but when Mom redecorated they immediately staked their claim. The walls are covered in posters of soccer players, video game ads, movie posters, the occasional comic strip, and now, for maybe the first time, one or two pictures of girls appear to have snuck their way into a place on the walls. Their desk is practically sagging under the weight of all the junk piled on it, and I smile, because it reminds me so much of my own. The beat up TV they have hooked up to their video game console is frozen, some game I don't recognize set on pause.

"What are you playing?" I ask, still standing, watching them get settled back on the short couch.

"Zelda, but we've got the new Harry Potter game, you might like that," Jon answers, Dave is already off the couch digging around for it in their extensive pile of games.

"Okay," I say agreeably, taking a seat in the middle of the couch, leaving Dave his spot on the corner opposite Jon.

"It's really easy," Dave says, and then launches into a series of instructions for playing the game. Most of which go right over my head.

"I'll uh, just try to pick it up as I go along," I say, taking advantage of a pause in his diatribe.

"Yeah, okay," Dave says a bit sheepishly, handing me a controller.

"You can just try it out, I'll help you along until you get a feel for it."
I look over at Jon, but he's already in lounge mode, his hands folded behind his head, a content and relaxed look on his face.

I stick around for about an hour, and while Dave and Jon have a good time laughing at my expense and totally wiping the floor with me in various games (we kept trying to find one I didn't suck at) during that time, I figure sticking around much longer wouldn't have been the greatest idea, as I was beginning to sense their desire to get back into some competitive play. It was still fun though, and I'm glad I got the chance to hang out with them a little bit. We had a good time, so I think they were glad too.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Six
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sat, 06 Sep 2003 15:36:56 -0500

The next day in school (first one back from exams), like five people walk up to me and remark in some way about my improved demeanour. It's a bit weird, but kind of nice too. Colin and I have a series of laughs during French, the only new class we have together, and Jonas is there with us, but he seems distant and withdrawn the whole time. I try to catch him heading out of class to talk about it, but he slips away too quickly.

"What's with him?" Colin asks coming up behind me. I shrug.

"Dunno," worry creeping up on me fast. I was already a little bugging about the fact that he didn't come to breakfast this morning, and this isn't helping matters

Colin slaps me on the back stalwartly, waking me back up.

"Wanna come over this afternoon, watch MUCH for a little while? You'll die if you see the 'I'm With You' video," I grin, feeling better already.

"Sure, meet you after English?" It's the last class of the day for each of us, though we don't have the same class. He's in Trans like Celery used to be.

"Yeah, perfect. Rock on Rock on," I smile.

It's how we always say good bye now. Following or during that, we always do some kind of free style hand shake, but one that looks really complicated and like it's our perfected by years of practice secret one. It's always a good time.

"Peace out. Avril," chuckling.

Getting home from Colin's later that evening, I see Jonas sitting alone at the kitchen table. It's past dinnertime, but Mom and Dad must still be at work. Otherwise they'd be in the kitchen doing the dishes and like listening to the radio. I think my parents are the only people who still do that in their own house.

"Hey Jonas." He looks up, with a grey, lost face.

"Hey."

"What's wrong?" I take the seat beside him.

"Wrong? Nothing. I'm fine." Right. Of course you are.

"You sure?" He fakes a smile. I should know, I've produced my share of them.

"I'm great, really. Everything's great." Now it's time for me to snort.

"Oh yes. Because your good mood is both obvious and contagious," props to Giles. Love that old guy.

"Nothing's wrong, really." I'm less than convinced.

I mean, even if he wasn't sitting here looking like someone just shot his dog, I'd still find the lack of Kyle vaguely suspicious and mildly worrying. Add to that the fact that he's been acting off all day, not to mention all the general weirdness that's been going on lately with him and Kyle about his parents and everything, and what you end up with is a very concerned and anxious me.

"Come on, Jonas, talk to me. Bottling stuff up never did anything good for anybody," and I'd know.

"I'm not," he protests. I sigh.

"Where's Kyle?" Jonas shrugs.

"I don't know. In his apartment I guess,"

"You haven't been up to see him yet?" He shakes his head.

"No," that's weird. But it probably means whatever's got him so wrecked doesn't have anything to do with Kyle directly. At least it lets me know it's probably not a fight between them that's causing Jonas's misery. And Kyle seemed fine yesterday evening.

"Is it your parents?" That's the only ongoing thing I could think of. I'm sure they've talked about it more since that one night of extreme emotional overboard and the re-emergence of me, but I'm pretty sure not everything's been totally and satisfactorily worked out yet.

"No," Jonas answers eventually. I think it's the truth.

"What then," he lets out a contender for the saddest sigh ever award.

"Erica," oh right. Yeah. That would do it.

"You called her?" He nods.

"Last night," must have been why he wasn't there when I visited Kyle. A bit unusual too, since he often spends the night now. Even if it was a school night, being Sunday. I assumed it was because of his parents. I wonder if he told Kyle anything different.

"Didn't go well?"

"You could say that," I slide my chair closer and slip an arm around Jonas's shoulders. Our kitchen table is round by the way, for the information of anyone who cares, keeping in mind I'm aware that's probably no one.

"You told her? About you? Kyle?" He nods slowly.

"It took me most of the conversation to convince her the whole time we dated wasn't a cover. You know, to get her to believe that I really did care about her. Love her even."

"So then you sorted stuff out?"

"Not really. She was really angry and hurt - but a lot of that was because of before. The way I left and then not giving anyone my real address - stuff that has nothing to do with me and Kyle. And I guess I deserved all that. One thing she did say was that she wasn't going to tell anyone," he sighs. "Probably doesn't want anyone to know she had a fag for a boyfriend,"

"Oh Jonas," I say, wincing at his words and reaching down to squeeze his hand. I can feel him starting to shake, about to break down. "It's okay," I whisper and that's it for Jonas.

He cries into me, letting go of what probably amounts to a whole childhood of trauma when you get right down to it. Everything about how he was raised doomed Jonas's relationship with Erica and I hope we can keep helping him get past all that so the same thing never happens to him and Kyle. Though, I feel pretty confident Kyle would never let it. I'll say one thing for all his pushing, it doesn't make it easy for a person to shut out the guy or keep him at an arm's length. He's got a very low tolerance for the walls people build around themselves and everything he is has been designed to knock them down.

"Jonas?" Kyle's voice from behind surprises both of us and I let go of him.

"Kyle?" Jonas looks up at him with his red shiny eyes, and I don't know how to deal with hearing so much confusion and need in his voice.

I get up though, clearing Kyle's path to his love.

"Stay with me, Jo," Kyle whispers, cradling him in his arms.

I wait long enough to see Jonas's hands move slowly around Kyle's back, and then I back silently out of the kitchen.

When I venture down the stairs a couple hours later, I find Kyle standing in the front hallway, looking frozen.

"Kyle?" My voice is faint, but still seems jarring in the silence.

"He finally told me why his parents are so protective of him." His voice is toneless, like he's talking in his sleep or under some kind of truth serum, speaking and giving information while remaining safely detached from it. I can recognise it easily enough, having grown so familiar hearing my own voice sound that way.

"What do you mean?"

"I always knew there had to be something else going on. Not just that they were a close knit family and didn't really mix with their other relatives. His loyalty to them, the fear and reluctance to disappoint them... no way that would have been as strong as it is just for the reasons he told me. I've just been waiting for him to tell me. And tonight he finally did," I go down the final three steps and walk over to Kyle.

"Do you want to sit down?" I'm pretty worried about him if you want the truth. He looks down at me from his four-inch advantage, blank face and empty eyes.

"He had a sister, Carrots," this revelation surprises and confuses me too much to allow for comment. "A twin sister, they were two perfectly healthy babies. Her name was Emma, and she was beautiful. He has a picture of them, they're sleeping together in their crib, both of them with this curly golden baby hair, I swear you'd think they were angels." I want this to be the end of the story. I'm not sure I can handle hearing the rest.

But Kyle's monotone voice carries on, "When they were a couple months old, they started sleeping in their own cribs. He thinks he has dreams about that sometimes. He wakes up feeling lonely, like he's missing something." Tears start to sting my eyes. "As soon as they could walk they were sneaking into each other's cribs. After a couple times of finding them like that, I guess his parents just gave up and let them share again. Even when they got to be older, three or and four, they shared a double bed. They were super little, but he knows they were best friends. He can't remember anything specific, but it's like, he gets feelings sometimes. Like he can almost remember for a second what it was like with her. He said it's a happiness like he's never felt since. Not better, just special and different." I squeeze his shoulder as he struggles to continue. I'm not

sure I want him to, except I know he needs to.

"I guess he had a really happy childhood, they both did. He's heard lots of stories, and there are more pictures, some movies. He wants to show them to me, the movies and everything. He told me he wants to share her with me, because even though he doesn't remember her, he knows he loved her." He sighs, and I almost think he isn't going to go on, until he starts up again,

"A couple months before their fifth birthday, they were biking together down some country road - you know, 'cause he grew up just outside of this really small town. I don't know, and neither does he because he can't remember, but I guess they were trying to cross from one side of the road to the other, or something, and this truck was turning off the highway." He swallows hard and bites down on his lip. "It hit her. And she died, instantly. The guy driving the truck just kept going. The police found her in the ditch, and Jonas was lying with her. Apparently he was talking to her, trying to get her to wake up, wiping the blood away.

He doesn't remember any of it of course - even if he hadn't been so young, I'm sure he would have blocked it out - but I can't even begin to imagine how many times he's heard that story. He doesn't even remember her, except maybe in those dreams. Can you imagine what that's like? I can't. I didn't know what to do," the emotion is slowly coming back to his voice, and the pain it brings is heartbreaking. "He's had to grow up with that his whole life. That loss has been hanging over him since he can remember. He told me it's like his parents love him twice as much as normal, like they didn't know how else to let her go but to focus all the love they had for his sister on him as well. That's why they're so bad at giving him any space, that's why they can't seem to let him go and be his own person. That's also why they have so much power over him. He told me all that, Care, and I didn't know one thing I could say to him. I tried to hold him, tell him I love him, but I don't know if it helped. I can't believe he's been carrying that around with him all this time, that he never told us. He said he doesn't like to think about it. I said I understood, but I don't understand any of it. How can I?" His eyes plead desperately for an answer.

"I don't know," I say, shaking my head. Kyle closes his eyes.

"I want to help so bad but there's nothing I can do," I put my arm around him, guiding him along with me into the living room. I think he's likely to collapse soon. Not that I know what I'll do when I get him there. This is way too far beyond me. I really wish my parents were home. But they've been really busy lately, not home much.

As we sit down together on the couch, I wish Celery were here with us also, that I could be leaning on him for support, that he could be on the other side of Kyle, holding him with me. Getting through this together.

"He didn't even seem that bad, you know? Better than me, but it hurt so much, knowing he has to feel stuff like that. If I'd lost any of you guys, even if I'd never gotten the chance to know you, I know I'd miss you." Mostly I'm realizing I don't have to talk. That what Kyle needs from me is just to listen, and be there.

"It's too big for me Carrots," he's overwhelmed, he's scared and now he's pleading with me. He's made things right for me so many times, now it's my turn to try and return the favour.

I begin straightening up, facing him, hands on his shoulders just to make sure he can't get away, but also to offer some attempt at comfort.

"It's not, Kyle. You can do this, you can be what he needs. Want to know why?" He nods glumly.

"Because Jonas believes in you. That's the only possible explanation. Why else would he have told you? He's trusting you with this big scary part of himself because he believes you can handle it. He loves you that much, enough to let you in to all the dark places inside him. This is an honour, Kyle. This is the biggest thing you've ever done. Just love him, man. I don't think it as anything to do with him expecting you to have the answers, he just needs you to know it. Because he wants you to love all of him. I know how you guys feel about each other, it's so clear. I've watched you, just like everyone used to watch me and Celery, and I can see it in your eyes. In your movements, in what you say to each other. The bad stuff, the pain, whether it be past, present, or worries about the future, that's all part of it. It's what comes with the territory. You love someone enough, their pain is worse to bear than your own. You can't stand watching it, and you want more than anything to make it go away, but sometimes you can't. You can't bring his sister back, Kyle, and all the love you have for him is probably never going to be enough to take away that kind of pain, but you have to keep loving him anyway. More than ever, he's letting you know how much he needs you. Above all, I think he probably needs you to be okay with this.

"Do you understand what I mean? Don't treat him like some delicate flower, okay, Kyle? He's been handling this thing for a long time now, he's obviously learned how to live and be happy, at the same time never forgetting about her. You've got to try to do the same. Be there for him about it when he needs you to, but mostly just be there for him. About whatever. Be there laughing and joking around with him when that's what he needs. I think I understand Jonas pretty well about some things, and one thing I KNOW I have his number about is change. It freaks him out just as much as me, and I can see why. So, don't act like nothing happened, don't just pretend he never told you, but don't let this turn into the be all end all. He's still Jonas, the goofball, the cynic, the zen master, the NADSAT

speaking godfather freak and the guy you love. You just know some more stuff about him now. You know stuff that can help you understand him better, so don't waste it."

I let my hands drop from his shoulders, but Kyle's eyes don't fall from mine, and he makes no sign that he's going to bolt. We stare at each other in silence for a very long time.

"Tell Mom and Dad I'll be home late, okay?" Because now suddenly he's getting up, standing, preparing to walk out of the room.

"Kyle, where are you going?" I'm nervous, not sure if he really heard me or not.

He smiles faintly.

"I'm going to go see about a guy," I laugh, at the cheesiness of his reverse pronoun rip off of the Good Will Hunting line, but also from relief.

"Okay, man," I say, getting up and walking him to the door.

We hug. Still not a thing we do a lot of, but it was that kind of moment.

"Say hey from me. And give him my love," he nods.

"I will. See ya, bro."

"Bye."

I watch him until he's out of sight down the street.

When Mom and Dad get home from work around 7, I give them a brief and highly censored recap, basically saying "Kyle and Jonas are going through something, Kyle's over there right now. It's serious, but I think they're going to be okay." Always the type to care and be concerned but rarely the type to pry, that was good enough for them. I imagine Dad will have a heart to heart with Kyle either when he gets home or sometime tomorrow, but for now they're okay to be patient and let Kyle and Jonas handle themselves.

Later that evening I'm feeling weak, worn out, and missing Celery desperately. I take comfort by crawling into bed early, snuggling down with the phone and a box of photos. I spend an hour flipping through pictures of us at various ages, while a tape he made me one lonely afternoon plays softly.

Just as I'm turning the tape over the second time, I come across a picture that steals the breath right out of my lungs. It's such a simple thing, so

simple I could easily have passed it by with little more than a glance. But for whatever reason I didn't, and now I'm staring at it, feeling so many different things I'm fairly certain my heart's preparing to explode.

It's just him and me, together, like so many of the other pictures, and yet I feel like no picture's ever showcased his love for me better. The picture is old, must have been grade three or four. We're lying on our stomachs in the living room, watching TV. Or, at least, one of us is watching TV. There's me, and I've got my chin propped up on both elbows, staring at the screen, some cartoon or whatever, the image is too blurry to make out. But what's going on with the screen isn't the story of this photo. Like everything else in my life, it's all about Celery. Unlike me, he's facing away from the screen, one hand only, turned towards me, eyes shining with rapture even across an eight year old photograph. He's 8 or 9 but he's looking at me. And there's the slightest smile softly gracing his lips, and you'd think I was the most perfect beautiful thing in the entire universe.

I'm completely helpless against the torrent of emotion, and the sobs come easily. I'm glad for the tears in my eyes, because it hurts too much to go on looking at that picture. For more reasons than I can possibly sort out or hope to understand, my heart is screaming and I feel like pain this exquisite shouldn't even be possible. The beauty of him is enough to utterly destroy me, and the absolute love expressed in his eyes is certainly doing its part, but most of all, it's that he's not here with me. This kind of desperation for his presence and his touch rips at my heart and shadows everything else.

It's lucky I don't need sight to dial his number, because as I do, the tears continue to fall relentlessly.

I sob into the phone, harder even than before once his confused voice comes through the other end, and somehow eventually hear myself saying, "I love you so much," before another flood of tears takes over me.

"Carrots?" He's frightened and panicky but I can't stop crying. "Baby, I love you, what's wrong?" His voice threatens to throw me head first off the edge I've been clinging to so desperately.

"Nothing," more quiet sobbing, as I struggle to get a hold of myself, "Well, everything, but it's not... nothing happened. I just love you and I miss you so much and I want so badly for you to be here right now and you're not and," again I lose my voice to a wave of tears.

"Baby Carrots," I can't remember the last time he used the full nickname like that, or if I've ever heard it so forcefully and lovingly used. "I love you too, and I miss you too. But you have to breathe, baby, listen to my voice, hear me, okay? I love you, I'm with you, all the time, wherever you are. Do you understand? No matter what, you always have my love, just

breathe," and because it's him and his voice as much as his words, my heart slows down and my breathing starts coming back in more than frantic gasps, and the tears stay wet on my cheeks, but no new ones fall.

"All better?"

"Thanks to you."

"Want to tell me what that was all about?" He's calm now, hearing that I am. Gratified to have been able to do his job well.

"It wasn't really for any reason. I was just looking at some pictures, and I guess you could say I got a little overloaded."

"Just a little," in his teasing, gentle tone.

"Yeah," there's happiness and peace in my voice, and I like hearing it, knowing he will too.

"Any particular reason for the photographic trip down memory lane?"

"Oh, not really. It's just something I do sometimes, when I'm missing you the most."

"That's when you should call me baby," there's no reproach in his voice, just a reminder.

"I know, and I always do. I just do the picture thing first. Most of the time," I sigh a little ruefully, "Well, most of the time it really calms me down."

"Not this time though."

"Well, quite obviously, no. Not this time. But this, now, the calling. It's done it."

"I'm glad, baby." And he's clearly a considerable lot more than glad, but what his words don't say, his voice makes up for.

I wonder briefly if I should bring up Jonas, but figure that, in some shape or form at least, he already knows, and don't really feel like burdening him with that all over again.

"What were you doing before I called you?" Wishing to bring us to more calm, regular things. Also wanting to ask anything so long as it keeps him talking.

"Oh, nothing much."

"How exciting."

"I supposed I COULD bore you with the details," I sigh, settling down on my bed.

"Please do."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Seven
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
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At breakfast the next day, Kyle is sleepy, but seems at peace. He smiles when I sit down.

"Morning bro," I say, keeping things casual.

"Hey, Care."

"You okay?" He nods.

"Yeah, I am actually. When I went over," he shrugs. "We just held each other awhile, and that was enough. Then we talked for a bit, but it really did seem like all he wanted was for us to do regular stuff, be normal with each other."

"So what'd you do?" He grins sheepishly.

"We played Chinese checkers."

"What?" I laugh because it just seems weird to me that their definition of normal quality togetherness is playing Chinese checkers.

"Don't knock it, man. It's a fun game. And Jonas likes it a lot. He used to play it all the time when he was a kid. He told me once some of his best childhood memories are of playing Chinese checkers with his parents." I'm glad to see only a little heaviness enter Kyle's eyes as he says this, and also to see it soon give way to happiness again.

"That's good, Kyle." He nods.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's really good."

And we go on eating our breakfast in the exact kind of silence you want while eating breakfast while you're eating breakfast with your brother.

Later the twins come downstairs, squinting and yawning, still half asleep and yet somehow managing to have perfectly styled their hair in that state. They join us in brotherly silence, and it's good.

School is as thrilling as can be expected, which is to say, not at all, but it's doesn't drag quite enough to be PAINFUL, so let's call it an upside. Walking home with Jonas is, I'm pleased to report, relatively trauma free, and though we do talk some about the events of yesterday, there's a confidence and serenity in his voice that's extremely welcome to

my ears. And that's quite the accomplishment, considering yesterday included Erica, his parents, and his sister.

Home also proves pleasantly relaxed and to the good. Jonas, Kyle and I do the homework thing, and then I decide to pop in on Colin for awhile.

Naturally, he welcomes me with open arms.

"Uh, why are you here?" I shrug.

" 'Cause it's just something I often am these days."

"And you like, want to come in or whatever?"

"That was my hope, yes," he starts chewing on his lip.

"Um, okay."

"Dude, I don't like, HAVE to, if you're like busy or whatever..." I'm not like, hurt or whatever, this is just, new and different. Colin being busy. Colin having plans not involving me, bad pop music and more and more frequently crossword puzzles (that's a story for another time).

"Well, it's just, I was sort of on my way out," I take a closer look at him, and evaluate the signs.

He's embarrassed about where he's going! And now I get to weasel it out of him and make him all self-conscious. Oh joy! "Don't start," comes his warning tone, noting the evil gleam in my eye. I switch to uber-pout.

"But it'll be SO much fun." He shakes his head.

"I don't have the time. Tomorrow, I promise. You can dig and be nosy, for awhile I'll be coy and evasive, then after 5 minutes or so I'll cave in and tell you. Following that, you can act shocked, then slightly puzzled, and eventually, you'll get over that and just enjoy teasing me about it. Okay?" I grin.

"Yeah okay."

"So bye, Carrots," I try to make my grin as devious as possible.

"Actually, I was sort of planning on waiting around in your bushes, and then following you wherever you've going." He rolls his eyes.

"As much as I'd love to have you as my friendly neighborhood stalker, now is just really NOT the time. So asking you politely having failed spectacularly, I will now say this: shove it."

I smile and start walking away down his front walk. Stopping to shout over my shoulder,

"Only for you!"

Which earns me a chuckle, and he calls after me,

"Hey Avril!" I turn around and grin at him.

"Rock on, rock on?"

He nods. "And don't forget to peace out," I wave a hand at him, and then head off down the street.

"Well?" I demand, poking him in the shoulder. Colin chuckles.

"You just pick up right where you leave off, don't you?" I nod.

"That's right, now spill." He cocks his head.

"Spill? Don't get ahead of yourself, my friend. I promised you at least five minutes of evasiveness, did I not?" I do the pout/glare thing.

"You were like, serious?"

"Oh quite,." he informs me cheerfully.

"Zero percent fun is you."

"Life's full of disappointment."

"Specially with friends like you." He gives me the `oh yeah, I feel SO sorry for you not' look.

"Whaa, whaa, whaa."

"This is you being evasive?"

"Or something similar to it, yes."

"Just tell me," I happily whine.

"No."

"No?"

"Can't."

"Why not?" He grins.

"Gotta go to class," and before I can curse at him, or perhaps just strangle his treacherous little neck, the bell rings, and Colin bounces off down the hallway to homeroom.

Oh well. He may be safe for now, but I'm going to drop our Law textbook on his foot next period.

"Ow, that hurt, you bastard." It's a big textbook.

"Yeah, well you deserved it." He glares at me, rubbing his foot.

"I did not."

"Yeah you did."

"I did no wait. I'm too cool to do that."

"If you don't tell me what you were doing last night, I'm gonna smack you in the face with my bendy ruler." He raises his eyebrows at me.

"You would really do that to me? I thought we were pals."

"Pals don't lord secret activities over each other." He sighs, in a happy way.

"Fine, fine. I give up. Are you bracing yourself?"

"Yes."

"Waiting for it?"

"Colin."

"Curling."

"What?" He shrugs.

"I was curling." I blink at him in astonishment.

"Like, with the rocks and the brooms and the ice and the," and here comes the most surprising component of all, "TEAMMATES?" He grins.

"That's right, Asparagus."

"Curling?"

"With the rocks and the brooms and the ice and the teammates, yes."

"Really."

"Really."

"I find this news quite baffling." He chuckles.

"I can sorta tell."

"I mean, you on a team, this is a concept I'm struggling with."

"Why?" I snort.

"You don't play well with others," he grins.

"No, I suppose I don't."

"So? Curling? Team? Explain these things to me."

"Well, curling is just something I do. I don't know. I admit it's quite dorky, but like, you know, also, enjoyable in its dorky way. It's a my dad thing. Him and all his best friends in high school curled together." He looks at me in a don't-you-dare-make-fun-of-that way, "They lived in a small town,"

is how he explains why. "Anyway, it's just something to do. Fills up some time, and it has me interacting with people somewhat resembling my own age, which for a long time got my dad off my back about public school. And it's not OVERLY teamy. Not as much as some sports. There has to be connection and understanding, but other than yelling `hurry', `hurry hard', and `whoa' at people, I don't have to do much other talking." So now it all makes sense in a Colin sort of way, and the making fun of him portion of today's festivities can begin.

Knowing what's coming, Colin just sighs.

"Bring it on, small fry."

Time is passing as it does and a new pattern and rhythm has begun to form in my life. In the morning I eat breakfast with Kyle and the twins, then Jonas comes at some point and we'll walk together to school. While in school, I try to divide my time between Jonas, Colin, Kaleb, and a handful of other people, including Brian and Alex. By lunch I've usually been

called homo or fag at least twice, one of Cherrie's bimbo horde has found some way to make my day a little more scarring, and I've learned a thing or two. Had some laughs. None of my other friends (particularly Jonas) have really seemed to warm up to Colin, so we make our own fun. The kind of jokes we laugh about, the things we share, they're not really the kind of thing you can open up to too many people. Part of the fun always has to be that we're the only ones who think something's funny. No one else gets the joke, and we don't want them too. That kind of thing.

It's something I'm learning from Colin. He has this whole "I don't care" attitude I've really come to admire. He's not a mean guy, not at all, but he's just really unconcerned with what other people think of him. If someone doesn't like him, he says, fine. That's cool. Lots of times when people haven't liked me I've asked them why or tried to like, win them over or something. It's just always been the way I am. Colin's totally different. His whole attitude is "this is who I am, take it or leave it."

Though it may be something I'm personally impressed by, this philosophy of his hasn't done much for Colin's social status. Basically, I'd say I may be the only person in our entire grade who doesn't think he's an asshole. And you'd really think it would bother him. That, at the very least, part of him has to mind, even if he doesn't show it. But he really doesn't care. I mean, I can tell. In fact, I'm pretty sure he thinks it's funny. It's like, he doesn't think about them, all the people who think he's annoying or a snob or whatever. They don't really cross his mind. He just does his thing. If it wasn't for me, he'd probably just spend this whole day listening to music and totally zoning out. But the thing is, THEY care. All he has to do is sit in class, existing, and it pisses people off. He doesn't have to DO anything. And he loves it. I mean, he really does. You gotta admire that.

Sorry. I was supposed to be telling you about my average day. Got a little off track there.

Where was I? Lunch, you say? You know, I think you may be right. Good job, dude. Nice to see you were paying attention for once.

Yeah right, I know. Off track again.

So, lunch. Lunch hour is pretty much the same. It's a Jonas, Alex and Brian thing. We'll hang out together while we eat, and then I'll get up and like, circulate. Spend a little time hanging with Kaleb and his boys (he's gotten quite popular this past year and now travels in something of a pack) and then hook up with Colin for the last like 15-20 minutes. It's still way too freezing to be walking around outside more than absolutely necessary, so mostly we'll just roam the halls or stake out an empty class room. Sometimes we listen to music on his Discman or just talk or whatever.

Back in classes for the afternoon, regular stuff. Learning, the odd frightening encounter with a girl, verbal harassment. Maybe it sounds like I'm downplaying all this, and it's not that I don't think stuff like being harassed for being gay is a big deal, it's just, if I don't care, it doesn't matter. I know I'm better than them. I know who and what I am is nothing to be ashamed of. They're the idiots, and letting idiots ruin my day just turns me into an idiot too. Not like this always works for me, but I guess it's just Colin's influence or whatever. He's helping me develop my very own "some people just don't matter" type scowl, and teaching me to say fuck the world and really mean it.

Afternoons are thus: homework with Jonas and sometimes Kyle, then dinner.

Following dinner, I'll end doing any number of things. Getting trounced by Dave and Jon at a video game or two, watching TV with any combination of family, chilling in Kyle's apartment with just him and Jonas, maybe taking an evening to myself to just read or listen to some tunes, some kind of action with Colin, or talking to Celery on the phone or MSN.

Celery and I talk for real about two or three times a week now, and other than that, it's e-mail and messenger or whatever. It's been really good. Very relaxed, very laid back. Nothing too heavy, you know? We still get pretty sappy sometimes, but even that has a more playful side. Mostly anyway. We try to keep it light.

The only problem type thing I can think of (but of course I could think of one) is that we don't always get to talk as much as I'd like. We're just really busy, you know? He's got basketball and work and then there's Saul, plus all the normal goings on of life stuff, and I've got all the stuff I've already explained. So sometimes we'll each be free on different days and miss each other, or we'll get a hold of one another, but it'll be too late to talk long, or in the middle of a busy evening and there won't be much time to talk.

Sometimes too, just because of how much is going on, it's a little hard for us to connect with each other. What I mean is, things are so different for both of us. The things he's doing and the things I'm doing. It's so much different than before when every experience was shared. Our frames of reference being so different, it can be a bit weird sometimes. We can take each other by surprise.

Take our conversation yesterday for example. I'd called fairly early in the evening, and our talk had already been going for over an hour. Then, in passing, while we were talking our plans for the coming week, trying to plan phone calls, he said,

"Yeah, on Saturday I'll be at the hill most of the day, but if you call by around 9 your time I should be back," I had no idea what he was talking about.

"The hill?"

"Yeah, the ski hill," more confusion.

"You ski now?" He laughed.

"No. Snowboarding," I was so surprised, honest to god, I almost dropped the phone.

"What?!"

"I didn't tell you that?" Um, no.

"No," Unable to keep the strangeness out of my voice. SNOWBOARDING?

"I really thought I'd mentioned it.,"

"Believe me, I would have remembered." Another chuckle.

"Yeah, I guess so."

You guys remember my anti-snowboarding rant right? Right?!

"Explain please," I requested dryly.

"Oh well, I know its lame and everything, but I'd been going crazy never getting to skate. It doesn't compare, but, well, it's really easy. Like, way easier than skateboarding anyway. The rumors are true," I smiled a little at that, but I still couldn't understand how he'd started actively participating in a sport we'd always shared so much fun loathing about.

I felt like I imagine Willow must have felt when she found out Xander was going out with Cordelia. You know, the "I hate Cordeilia club, of which you are treasurer", and "it goes against all rules of God and man", except, replace Cordeilia with snowboarding. Well, not that wigged, but it was definitely weird. Also weird that he didn't tell me.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Since I got back from Christmas." He sort of sighed, not sadly, just like, apologetically or something. It's hard to explain.

"I was so stressed and freaked out, I needed to calm down. But I couldn't skate. Like, Calgary has the Vans Park and it's wicked, but it's not the same you know? If I'm skating to calm down, I need to be alone. Or with you. Anyway, Saul knew I was seriously bugging, and he suggested I give the whole snowboarding thing I try. Believe me, I shut him down a bunch of

times, but eventually he wore me down. So I went with him this one time, and I guess, I don't know. I just took to it or whatever. Cause of what I said about it being easier than skating, and that was a plus cause I didn't totally suck so I wasn't all frustrated and shit. Also, it's pretty peaceful. When you go on an off day, and you're on a really empty run, it can be amazing. Drive out to the hill, surrounded by mountains, it's pretty sweet." I was confused still in some ways, but it made me happy to hear the like, serenity in his voice and I was glad he has a place like that, even if it was just in his memory at that moment.

"So anyway, since I was getting pretty stoked on it, I decided to like, get myself a board and everything. I got a set up cheap from this dude Marcus who works with me at Skate," that's a skate shop in Calgary. He's been working there pretty much since he moved. "And a season pass to the hill, and that's about it. I go usually every weekend. That's why I'm hardly ever there until the evening."

"Oh well, cool I guess. I'm glad you're having fun."

"Well, I am, but not nearly as much fun as I'd be having if you were there too," I smiled, in a like, knew-it-was-coming-still-glad-to-hear-it kind of way. You know, the sometimes we like to be reminded of stuff even if we've heard it a million times thing.

"Thanks, sweet one."

"Hey, you don't have to thank me. I love you."

"I love you too," I felt myself getting a little said, just 'cause I knew that by saying that, we were getting ready to say goodbye.

"Talk to you again, what was it? Wednesday?"

"Yeah," it was Sunday we were having this conversation, and it's Monday now.

"Okay, I'm looking forward to it already."

"Me too."

"Love you, baby."

"Ditto. Bye, Cel."

"Tra la."

So yeah. Sometimes things get a little weird, or different. But it always turns out fine. Better than even. Life is good. And I'm happy.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Eight
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Mon, 20 Oct 2003 15:33:13 -0500

"Colin." The morning break, sitting in Law class with the quality dude I just addressed.

"Yeah, Asparagus?"

"I need to ask you something."

"Fire away."

"It's something I've noticed you doing a lot lately, and I've tried to wait patiently for you to explain yourself, but it seems more and more obvious that you're not going to do that, so I'm just going to have to ask you directly."

He puts down his book and goes eye to eye with me.

"What's up?" Serious and even a little concerned.

I just barely manage to keep my delighted and quite evil grin to myself.

"Why do you call me Asparagus?" He rolls his eyes, realizing he's been had.

"Nice job." I grin.

"Thank-you. But I'd still like you to answer." He shrugs.

"Rolls off the tongue."

"It rolls off the tongue?"

"It sure does. It's also extremely fun to say. Give it another go."

"Asparagus."

Well damn.

"Okay, so it is a little fun to say. That still doesn't explain why you call me that."

"Sure it does. Fun to say. Guy who likes things that are fun to say. I think it makes perfect sense." Well, maybe on your planet.

"Your logic does not resemble our earth logic." He grins at my Buffy quote.

I grin back, pleased that he caught it. Which is more than can be said for you.

"So you just came up with it out of nowhere?"

"Mostly," with a non-committal nod. "See, originally, I figured, okay, he's Carrots, the other one's Celery... all these vegetable names going around why not me too? And then I thought, alright, if you were a vegetable, which vegetable would you be? I soon realized that this was a pointless exercise as I am NOT a vegetable nor do I ever hope to be, but that all in all, Asparagus is my favourite vegetable name. I then came to the tragic conclusion that YOU would never endorse a nickname you hadn't come up with yourself, and also decided coming up with a nickname for one's self is rather lame. However, I wasn't quite ready to let go of my dream to make the word Asparagus a part of my daily routine, and thus, I turned the name over to you."

"You're pretty much completely insane."

"That's right."

"But you obviously put a lot of thought into this, and for that I salute you. I proudly wear the new nickname Asparagus."

"Not like I'd stop calling you it anyway." I smirk.

"Quite."

During the next break of the day (that'd be the one in the afternoon) I run into Kaleb at the water fountain.

"Fancy meeting you here," he kids, pulling his now alarmingly long hair away from his face and bending down for a drink. And okay, don't get pissed at me, but damn that looked hot.

I'm still sort of ogling when he straightens up after his drink.

"Problem?" I shake my head jerkily.

"No." He laughs.

"You too, huh." What? Me too?

"I think I'll take the safe 'huh?' response here."

"The long hair? It's a thing for you, right? I should have guessed after Celery." I don't think I've got any credible denial to stand on after my ogling.

"I'm going to avoid looking at you for the next little while to keep from blushing," I inform him while staring at my finger nails.

"I usually wear it back, that's probably why you didn't notice it before." Like this is somehow supposed to comfort me. Right.

"That and I'm not an altogether observant guy." Something in Kaleb's face changes and his tone grows more serious.

"No. One way or another, you're usually pretty focused on one person." I snap my eyes away from their oh-so fascinating exploration of my finger nails to stare at Kaleb.

He smiles a bit sadly, like he's a little sorry he's brought it up.

I sigh.

"Man, I'm sorry I've been like."

"Ignoring pretty much everyone?" The self-deprecating laugh.

"Yeah. But especially you. You're my pal. And we haven't hung out in forever. Let's do something about that though. What're you doing this afternoon?" He shrugs.

"Not much. Shane's coming over, but not until like eight. He has to work."

"So what do you think? I come over, we bond, listen to some of those beloved TAPES of yours. We can catch up." He smiles.

"Sure. That'd be cool I guess. Want to just walk together right after school?"

I nod.

"Sounds like a plan." The bell's going to ring any second. "Meet you at your locker after the last bell?"

"Yeah, see you then."

And we do the separate ways to separate classes thing.

After school bonding with Kaleb proves to be an excellent time. Obviously, interactions with different people are going to be different, and I sort of forgot how well Kaleb and I go together in our own certain half-joke-flirty palish way. Like, Colin is my ultra-straight, just totally insane talks to me about bad pop music and calls me Asparagus top of the line friend. Jonas

and Kyle are my best friends and my brothers. Celery is my best friend slash love of my life guy. I have my school friends, the closer ones like Alex and Brian, but then there's Kaleb here, the dude I've shared some pretty weird experiences with, and miraculously ended up still getting along with. So it's fun. And it's relaxing. And we're going to do it again soon.

Home and Kyle's walking out of the kitchen into the hallway.

"There's a weird message for you," he says as he starts up the stairs.

"Um okay, thanks." He nods and keeps going.

I let the desire to check my message distract me from the weirdness of Kyle's behavior.

So I go and I enter the voicemail code and do all the pressing 1-1 or whatever that's needed, and listen to my message, which goes, "Hey Krame it's Sein," and that's all.

This causes laughter. Because it's a Seinfeld thing (message taped straight off the show even), and I love Seinfeld. And thus, laughter. I head up to my room, and call Celery, 'cause like, who else would leave me such a message?

The phone rings for like ever before he picks up.

"Hey."

"Hey Carrots," he sounds bit out of breath. "Give me a second would you? I just like seriously got in two seconds ago, I need to take off my clothes."

"I'm all for that." He laughs.

"From practice, I didn't shower there. And I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I will be putting other clothes ON. Hang on, okay?"

"Yeah man, sure." I twiddle my thumbs, try not to think too hard about how bummed it makes me I'm not even there to enjoy him getting all naked and everything.

"Okay, I'm back," his voice returns all husky and deep.

Do you think he knows what he's doing to me? Yeah. Me too. The bastard.

"Hey again. But wait," 'cause here's this thing I'm confused about, "How could you just have gotten home? You left a message for me like an hour ago...?"

"Uh, no I didn't." Watch as my confusion grows.

"Huh?"

"Pretty much my thoughts. What are you talking about?"

"Well there was a message--" Oh! Colin.

"Carrots?"

"Um, never mind. It doesn't matter. It was someone else. But I'd rather talk to you anyway."

"That's comforting."

"What can I say? I love you."

"Of course you do."

"I'd be insane not to. But anyway, how was practice or whatever?"

"Or whatever?"

"Yep. Whatever you want. Tell me whatever you want. Talk to me about you and your day and what clothes you're wearing, and the way you combed your hair..."

"Basically just drone on while you zone out?"

"Celery! I will not zone out."

"But this is a talk to me about whatever mostly what I care about is hearing your voice call, right?" He's still so fucking smart. I could kick him.

"It's both that and an I love you and want to hear about your life call. So talk."

"Okay baby. Let me think. There's not much new to report. I got a 25 cent raise at work."

"Score." He chuckles.

"It's better than nothing. Anyway, I like working there. As long as it's enough for all these calls and everything, I'm happy."

"And everything?"

"Sure."

"No, that question was my way of requesting that you elaborate."

"Check you out, minute detail boy. But alright. Hmmm.... well there's my bus pass to get to work and school, and like awhile ago I bought Saul a present for his birthday--"

"What'd you get him?"

"What? Just this book he wanted. An old university textbook actually. Microbiology or whatever. He's into that stuff."

"You have weird friends."

"Sure. Look at you," which is what I wanted him to say. I grin.

"Exactly. So, what else?"

"My only other expense type thing would be my pass for the hill, and my snowboard, but I got good discounts on all that stuff."

"See? That was so much more fun than 'and everything!'"

"I'm sure you found it fascinating."

"It was about you," I say in all seriousness.

"Every once in awhile I almost forget how incredible you are." He's getting a little choked up himself.

"I hope you never forget how much I love you," I don't even want to think about that. I don't want to live in a world where that's a possibility.

"No, just like I never forget how much I love you back," when these words reach me, I start to breathe again.

"Good."

This is something that just seems to happen. One way or another, we always get back to the distance and how much it hurts. We'll start off just totally casual, two best pals on the phone catching up, but by the end, we're always two lovesick dudes missing each other like demons.

"But everything's going okay?" 'Cause I need a break to get a hold of myself.

"Yeah pretty much. I'm really looking forward to Spring Break," the mention of that throws me into another tailspin of emotion, but the good kind this time. He still knows exactly what to say.

"God, me too. I'm not sure I'll be able to stand letting you leave when the week's over though." I think I can hear him smiling.

"Yeah. Those wild horses are going to have quite a time dragging me away."

We talk for a little while longer, but keep it pretty short. I guess mostly it was because we were worried the bad emotions stuff would float up again if we left it too long. So it was just a few minutes more of talk and then we said goodnight.

I take my 15 minutes of just lying on the bed, breathing and thinking calming thoughts like I always need to after a talk with Celery (good or bad) and then I call Colin.

"Hey Asparagus," he sounds relaxed, cheerful.

"Hey."

"Kaleb went long?" His way of asking why I'm so late getting back to him.

"Not really, I called Celery first. I thought the message was from him," I wasn't going to tell him that. Weird how it just slipped out.

"Really? That's kind of weird. He's into that whole Seinfeld thing too?"

"Yeah, some."

"How's he doing?"

"Fine, keeping busy."

"You always like this when you get done talking to him?" There's a touch of amusement in his voice.

"Like what?"

"Talking in little fragments, all muted and withdrawn?"

"That's what I'm being?"

"Can you hear yourself?" I chuckle.

"Sorry."

"Hey it's no problem. I think I can understand. Anyway, I just called you to say don't forget to watch the Becoming Avril Lavigne tonight," this is maybe the 100th time he's reminded me today.

"Oh right! I totally forgot."

"I know that a lot of people may find your sarcasm cute, but I'm not one of them." I laugh.

"Whatever, dude. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Rock on Rock on."

"Peace out, Avril," I complete my portion of our farewell, and hang up.

My next trip is to Kyle's place. I need to find out what was up with that guy earlier today. You remember. When he was acting all distant, weird, and me-like.

I knock, and hear mumbling, which I assume is my cue to come in.

Kyle, I find, is sitting on his couch, with some books open around him, but he's staring blankly into space.

"Kyle, are you okay, man?"

"Yeah, sure." But there's no conviction there.

"Kyle man, don't lie to me." He sighs.

"It's nothing. Just a stupid fight with Jonas." I sit down beside him and offer him an arm around the shoulders as my attempt at comfort.

"What happened?" He shrugs slightly.

"Nothing much. Like I said, it was stupid. Only," another sigh, heavier this time, "we seem to be having a lot of those lately."

"Why do you think that is?" Another shrug, this one a little more definite. An 'I don't want to try think about it' shrug. Like he knows he could probably come up with the reason, but isn't too sure he wants to.

"I don't know. I guess maybe," sigh, "It's like, got something to do with his parents. I mean, even when that's not what we're arguing about, it's like, always there. Causing tension, setting one of us off and we'll get all pissed for no reason."

"What was the lack of reason this time?"

"It's a huge nothing," he's not exhibiting eagerness to share details.

"Come on Kyle, give."

"Like I said, it was nothing. He said he needed to go home for dinner, I wanted him to stay, one thing led to another."

"One thing led to another?" I'm not just asking because I'm a nosy bastard, I also really don't know what he means. Going out with Celery isn't really great arguing experience.

"Well, first I got frustrated, and then he got defensive, and slowly voices got louder and there may have been hand waving, and possibly some swearing." Kyle tells me these things patiently, because he knows I'm new to this stuff.

"That doesn't sound very fun."

"No. It's not." Kyle grins. "Making up can be though," I make a face.

"Don't gross me out, dude."

"A thousand apologies."

"But that's it?"

"That's it."

"Except that that's not it, right? Not really?" It's time for a big sigh. Not a little sigh, a big fat one.

"Not even close."

"What are you going to do about it?" Even more sigh action.

"Not sure. Send his parents an anonymous letter and some revealing photos?" I'm about to go, 'you wouldn't' when the like, last part of what he said sinks in.

I immediately throw my hands up over my face.

"Oh ga, dude! Don't tell me there are actually pictures!" Kyle laughs.

"So what if there are?" I can't even look at him. Or anything. I'm too afraid to open my eyes.

Eventually, he has pity on me.

"Relax, Care, I was kidding. There are no pictures. You can open your eyes now." And I do, but slowly, cautiously. You know, just to be on the safe side.

"Getting back to the point you've so expertly managed to keep distracting me from," I say pointedly.

"Um, yeah. That was like, my best plan so far, and obviously that's saying something. See, the reason most of our fights end up being about other stuff is, I don't really feel comfortable pushing him too much about his parents. Not since I found out about why he's so afraid to upset them and everything. You know, like his sister and everything." I get that. I wouldn't know what to do either. But I'm not the one who needs to figure it out.

"Maybe I'll leave you do to the deep thoughts thing for awhile?" Kyle's face is sort of 'huh?' for a second, but then comes understanding.

"Yeah bro, sure. Thanks for the talk though. I feel marginally better now." I smile.

"Then I'm marginally proud of myself." He shakes his head, obviously deciding he doesn't need to bother saying 'too lame' or something of that nature.

"Hit the road, C1."

"Night man."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Nine
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Mon, 03 Nov 2003 13:32:38 -0600

Okay. So obviously something we've learned by now is that nothing in my life can be simple. I mean, that would just be silly. It pretty much seems like no matter what, at least one thing in my life has to be going all screwy or wonked or whatever. So naturally, just as things have gone back to being really good with me and Celery, and I'm really starting to get my bond on with Colin, all my other friends have gone insane. And I'm not talking about Jonas and Kyle, 'cause that's real and serious and I'm really worried about them. But at this particular moment, I'm talking about something else. And in case you forgot (and I bet you did, even though I only said it like two lines ago) what I'm talking about is INSANITY.

Like, I'll give you an example. What just happened to me about five seconds ago in the cafeteria actually. I was walking over to the table of Brian, innocently planning to sit down with him and start having my lunch (like I've done so many times I don't even know why I'm explaining it to you) when he gets up, glares at me, and then walks off. I mean, what the hell? And that glare was definitely for me too. And like okay, I've noticed some distance and weirdness before this, but this was the first time someone has actively avoided me and openly exhibited dislike.

So I sit down, and direct my look of 'what the hell' to Jonas and Alex. Alex makes an annoyed sound in his throat, and gets up too. Double what the hell.

"Jonas?" I ask. "What's going on? Are they like mad at me or something?" He rolls his eyes.

"Just a little bit." Shaking his head with 'I don't believe this' type disgust.

"And I take it you're mad at me too."

He sighs. "Carrots, the 'I'm oblivious' thing? It's getting really old. Okay? Just give it up already."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," and I really, really don't.

"Whatever, man. I think I'm going to bail too. I'll see you after school."

Leaving me where you find me now, sitting alone at the table, completely stunned.

A few minutes of that stunned thing happens, and then I feel Colin's hand on my shoulder.

"What's up, kid? Why the solo dineage?" I shrug.

"For some reason I have zero clue about, everyone is pissed off at me." He takes a seat.

"Zero clue?" I nod.

"One hundred percent no clue."

"Who's all mad at you?"

"Everyone!"

"Well, I doubt that. For example, I'm not mad at you. I bet other people aren't too." He gets up, and walks a few strides over to a table packed with grade nines.

"Any of you mad at him?" he asks them, pointing at me.

"Uh, no," one says, looking more than a little uncomfortable. Big bad senior I guess.

"See," Colin is triumphant, sitting back down with me at our table.

"Everyone who knows who I am, then."

"Possibly. But unlikely. Find someone else. Look around, what about that girl over there?"

"Jordyn?"

"She's perfect! You even know her name!" And you don't?

"Dude, that's Jordyn. She sat in front of us in Bio. She works on the yearbook, the paper..." He shrugs, unconcerned.

"If you say so."

"I do. I can't believe you don't know who she is, or like, her name at the very least." He shrugs again.

"Look, man, I know your name. That's about it." Now it's my turn to roll my eyes.

"Come on, you know way more than that."

"I do?" He sounds doubtful.

"Well, yeah! I mean, you know who Brian is, right?" He crosses his eyes in concentration.

"Brian is the retro glasses kid, right?" He's serious.

"No! That's Alex!"

"I thought Alex was the stocky choir boy."

"That would be Brian."

"Which would make the shrimpy blond with dreadlocks who always glares at me in Graphics Jonas!" He's actually like, proud of himself over there.

"Well done."

"What do you want from me?"

I smile. "Nothing. I just find it strange, that's all."

"Kay then. But, getting back to your plummeting popularity stock, still no theories?"

"Zilch."

"Then ask that girl whose name you can't believe I didn't know... you know, Jennifer or whatever,"

"Jordyn."

He laughs. "Yeah, I know."

"Okay, I'm gonna do it." Steeling myself and standing up.

Colin smiles approvingly. "There's a good boy."

I take a moment to glare at him, and then wave Jordyn over. She sees me, and comes reluctantly.

"Hey," I say.

"Hi."

Now, the question: how do you tactfully ask someone why the whole world suddenly hates you?

"I sort of have a weird question here. I've been noticing some... strangeness, lately, from people. Not of the good variety. And I was kind of wondering "

"Why everyone's so pissed off at you?"

"Yes!" I say, holding up a hand. "That's right. Exactly." Should I be offended or worried by how quickly she guessed?

"You really don't know?" why does everyone find this so surprising?

"I really don't."

She sighs, "Well, you don't need to look very far," and then she hits Colin with the old pointed stare for a couple seconds before walking off.

"This is YOUR fault?" He puts a hand to his chest, takes a step back.

"What'd I do?"

"Well I don't know, but apparently it was something."

"If I'm the one who did it, why's everyone mad at YOU?" That's a good point.

"I have no idea. But it's stupid. And I say grrr." He does the breathe out smile thing.

"Go with that then."

Walking and pouting being something I'm able to do at the same time, I start walking and keep pouting.

Colin pats my head.

"It's okay. We'll figure it out -- together!" I laugh at his cheesy optimism. Probably exactly like he wanted me to.

"It's just..." I sigh.

"Not totally with me yet about the some people just don't matter thing?"

"Well, no. I mean -- yeah, some people don't matter. But some people do. Like, Jonas matters. He matters to me. And I don't want him to be mad at me."

"We'll figure it out," Colin promises, now with his arm around my

shoulders. I smile gratefully.

We keep walking for a little while and then a question occurs to me. I decide to ask it. Mostly 'cause I want to know the answer, which is perhaps the best reason to ask a question.

"Why are you so nice to me?" He just gives me a confused look. "I just mean, like, what's so different about me? You like, hate everyone. Or at least, don't go out of your way to like them. So what makes me so special? How come you like me?"

He shrugs.

"I guess it's the part about you reminding me of me. And other stuff. You get that I don't care what people think, but it doesn't make you angry, you just let it be. You accept me without making it seem like a big deal." He shrugs. "We're just friends, Carrots, let's not try too hard to analyze why."

"Okay."

Just as we're about to reach my locker, Colin stops suddenly. I look at him quizzically.

"What?" He smacks himself in the forehead.

I repeat my question.

"I think I figured it out." He's sounding both annoyed and `the obviousness of this is killing me'.

"Really? What is it?"

"What were we just doing?" I shrug.

"Walking?"

"Yeah, but how?"

"I don't know, reasonably quickly, not over fast... what are you getting at?"

He sighs.

"I had my arm around your shoulders."

"So?" He raises his eyebrows. I continue to stare at him blankly.

"THINK, Carrots." I do. I've got nothi -- oh, those idiots!

When he sees the anger breaking out on my face, Colin knows I've gotten it.

"They think we're messing around?" Hear the fury in my voice, friends and neighbors.

I fume for awhile, the too angry to talk thing. Here's what's bothering me the most, "I can't fuck BELIEVE Jonas! He KNOWS I'd never do that!" And then more of the too angry thing.

"Doesn't matter, Carrots." He tries the placating tone.

"Doesn't matter? Colin, you're not mad about this? I mean -- you're straight!"

He shrugs. "I don't care what they think. It's what we know is true that matters, right?" Right... but damnit it! I'm mad over here!

He comes over and puts the arm back over my shoulders.

"You're my friend, Carrots," he says firmly.

Eventually, I can't help but smile.

"And you're mine. So fuck everyone else and what they think."

He grins proudly. "That's the spirit!"

I return the grin.

"Let's go to class."

The afternoon is a bit weird. Now that I know what's going on, I'm suddenly so aware of it, all the time. The weird looks we get, the way people whisper behind their hands to each other. Whenever it really starts to get to me, Colin will do something lame and cheesy, and it'll make me laugh. I try to convey the gratitude I have for what he's doing, and though I don't really get out the words, I'm pretty sure he understands.

I find Jonas waiting for me when I get to my locker at the end of the day. He's tugging at one of his dreads like I've noticed he often does when he's nervous.

I open my locker, exchanging the books in my hand for the ones I'll need for homework and stuffing them in my backpack. It's not until I've closed my locker and locked it again that I acknowledge Jonas.

"Hey," I say, trying in a half assed sort of way to suppress the rage in my voice.

The dread tugging increases. It's pretty cute, but he's not getting off that easy. Legitimate grievance guy over here.

"Look, man, I'm really sorry about earlier." He sighs. "I was just pissed off, and not even at you really, but you were there and I guess I sorta took it out on you. I'm sorry."

I shrug. "It's okay."

What's weird is that I really mean that. Suddenly I'm not mad at Jonas at all. I mean, I believe him, for one, and also, I just really don't want to be mad at him. I love the guy. It's lame being mad at your brother. I'd rather be having fun with him than being all alone and broody to like, punish him or whatever. That's no fun.

"No man, it's not. I had no right to treat you like that. Especially not 'cause... well, did you figure out why everyone's mad?" I nod.

"Yeah." His guilty look intensifies.

"I don't want you to think... I mean, I know you'd never - I know you'd never even look at another guy."

"Thanks, Jo." He comes up close.

"How you doing with it?"

"What, the knowledge that all my friends think I'm some kind of a backstabbing slut?" He winces.

"It's not like that."

"What's it like then?"

"They're worried about you. Colin is so..."

"Colin's a great person. Just 'cause he doesn't go around trying to please people all the time doesn't mean everyone has a license to hate him." Jonas just stands looking awkward.

"I guess that's true and everything," he concedes. But obviously isn't ready to change his own opinion on the matter.

"Anyway, let's get off that topic. I'm done caring about what other people think. He's my friend and that's it. People can say and think whatever they

want -- nothing's going to change that."

"Any ideas?"

"For what?" He smiles a little.

"The new topic." I throw an arm over his shoulders.

"How about the real reason you were so bitchy at lunch?" There's the hair tugging again.

"Um..."

"Kyle?" He looks up, surprised.

"Naturally brilliant?" I grin.

"Well, yeah, but that's not how I knew. Kyle and I talked last night." His expression turns to a mix of worried and more of the nervous.

"Is he really mad at me?" I shake my head.

"No. He's worried, and admittedly frustrated, but he's not mad. Not at you. The situation maybe." I toss in a shrug at the end.

"It's just," Jonas sighs. "It's really hard."

"I know." He looks at me with big eyes and a lip that wants to be pouting.

"They're my parents, Carrots."

"I know they are, man."

"I love them. But, like, I love him too." He shakes his head. "How am I supposed to make a choice like that? How can I pick between them?"

"I don't know, man. You don't know how much I wish you there was some way you didn't have to. I mean, this isn't really the kind of choice you should ever have to make. It's not fair."

"And neither is life, so I just have to deal, right?"

"I guess so."

The remainder of the journey home is walked in silence, but it's not all bad. Jonas looks pretty lost in thought, but I don't think he's exactly brooding. Just shy of it, but still, not completely gone.

The twins are just heading out the door when we get home. They stop though, when we almost plow into each other on the front steps. That's when they do something that surprises me, and leaves Jonas pretty much stunned.

First Dave, and then Jon, wraps Jonas in a hug, saying, "Love you, bro."

And that's it. They smile, and continue on their way.

Jonas just stares after them, his mouth hanging open. I slap him on the back.

"We all love you here, man." A small smile eventually finds its way on his lips.

"I know."

We work on homework for about an hour before Kyle shows up, and when he does, Jonas gets up immediately to greet him. They do the wordless stare thing for awhile, and then Kyle takes Jonas in his arms.

"I love you," he whispers into Jonas' ear.

Jonas turns his face up to Kyle's and beams softly at him.

I consider coughing loudly, but decide against it. I want them to have this. I want them to have a lot of this actually.

"I love you too, Kyle." Kyle beams back, and lets him out of the hug to take his hand.

I'm neither surprised nor offended when Kyle starts casually leading Jonas out of the kitchen and I can only assume up the stairs.

The next day happens, and it's good to see Kyle and Jonas tumbling down the stairs together, looking tired but blissful. It's a sight that's gotten way too rare in these parts lately. Jon and Dave happen to be up early as well, and they seem equally pleased. Smug even. Crazy kids.

Less fun is school, where I'm still pretty much doing the jaw grinding, fist clenching thing every time a disapproving glance or cough gets fired our way. Colin on the other hand continues to handle it calmly, occasionally even bordering on amusement.

Annoyance builds all morning, though when Jonas comes to sit with me at lunch and makes loud and obvious gestures of friendship it sort of cheers me up. The problem being that everyone starts looking at him like he's gone all traitor too, which gets me pissed off all over again.

Having made it to second period in the afternoon without completely wiggling on someone and like, just giving them the verbal thrashing of their life, I figure I've accomplished something great. Momentous. Possible miraculous even.

But just when I'm thinking, `hey, maybe I've been good long enough, I deserve to put some of this rage to good use', Colin again comes to my aid.

"Not so much with the just not caring thing today," he observes.

"Yeah. I've pretty much abandoned that. I'm going for seething with rage at the moment."

"Does it really matter to you that much? What people think of you?"

I turn to him and sigh, wanting to find a way to make him understand.

"They're supposed to be my friends, man. How come they don't trust me? How could they really believe something like this about me? Why do I rate such a low opinion?" More with the sighing. "But it's more than that, you know. That part I guess I can deal with. I won't ever like it, but I can recognize they're idiots and just not care."

"So what's the but?"

"The but is... it's like, has Celery always been the favourite and I just didn't know it?" Colin looks confused.

"What I mean is, how come everyone's automatically siding with HIM? Why isn't anyone going -- we know it's been really hard for you since Celery's gone, and we can understand why you need to be close with someone else? Why isn't anyone jumping to my defense? Why are Celery's feelings the only ones that matter in this little imagined drama? I know people love him over here -- it's sort of a common problem we have -- but I always thought they all loved me too. I thought we were pretty equally well liked. I mean -- which one of us at least made the effort to talk to other people every once in awhile? First and only clue: ME! So I guess I'm just like, surprised and a little sad, I thought I meant more to people than this."

Colin sighs and puts his hand on my shoulder.

"You do, Asparagus."

"What are you talking about?" I ask softly, all the wind now out of my sails after my little rant up there.

"Alright, so bear in mind that this is just a theory and it's possible it's not even a little bit valid," he cautions, holding up a hand.

I nod.

"Understood."

"Okay. So I just think that maybe, maybe this whole thing has more to do with jealousy than like, thinking you're really screwing around behind Wonder Boy's back." I smirk at the nickname, but then go back to being confused.

"Huh?"

He smiles a bit, doing the nose thing. It's his `okay-okay, I'll try to explain better' smile.

"It's like this, for all these years, it was you and Celery. And you made it clear there wasn't much room for anyone else in your little world. People got used to that, they accepted it. Didn't always like it maybe, but accepted it. Only then Celery moved. Suddenly it was a whole new ball game, see? Suddenly you've got all these people thinking maybe there was a spot open. And I don't mean just in the romantic sense. Because I think you ARE a really well liked guy -- maybe a little too well liked. That's the major flaw in your school-friends system, Care. You're all with the funny and the crazy and the nice, but never for very long. So you've got all these people wanting more. Wanting to get closer to you -- even if it's just in the hanging out, being pals capacity. Only they never went after it 'cause of Celery. Out of respect and also the knowledge that it'd be pretty much pointless.

"But go back to what I was saying before about Celery's leaving. The suddenly there's a spot open thing. I'm betting there were a lot of people that the thought occurred and appealed to. So they dealt with your grieving period because it was what was expected. They went with your ups and downs and shutting everyone out and just handled it. Waiting, biding their time. Being there for you until you'd finally be able to offer something back. And so finally, in just the past little while, you've started to be okay again. You've been laughing and making with the lame jokes and appear to be having a pretty quality time. Everything should be groovy, except you're not having fun with them. You're hanging out with ME -- some fucking upstart who never put in his time -- who let's face it -- nobody's an especially big fan of anyway. So it makes sense they're pissed off. Maybe it's just easier for them to tell themselves it's about the other thing instead of admitting they're all jealous or whatever."

"If that's really what's going on," I say eventually, shaking my head slowly, "I have a bunch of fucking idiots for friends." Colin laughs, surprised and no doubt a bit proud.

"Cheer up, at least you have me." I find it's too difficult not to grin back.

"Thank heavens for that."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Ten
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Tue, 11 Nov 2003 20:49:10 -0600

Such a typical evening I feel dumb describing it to you all 'cause you've heard it all before. It's me and it's Colin, and we're sitting in his room, back to back, doing our weird leaning thing. The music: OK GO. We're listening to stuff we actually like for a change.

Following the closing bars of You're So Damn Hot, Colin gets up off the bed, and stands about a foot away. He looks at me and asks,

"Carrots, you're gay, right?"

"That I am," and he knows this, so what's up with the question?

"So, like, what do you think?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Of what?"

He looks down at himself and sort of waves a hand up and down his front.

"Of me. Am I good looking?"

I smile. "I guess."

He immediately brings a fist to his chest, pretending to look crushed.

"You 'guess'? That hurts." I laugh.

"I'm sorry, Colin. Your body is a wonderland." He does the breathe out smile thing, and but then mashes his lips together.

"But seriously? Give me your honest opinion."

"Of how you look?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"No reason," this is when it starts to be fun.

"No reason eh?" He blushes.

"Yeah that's right."

"Colin," I coo, "Do you have a crush?" I creep closer, like I'm going to tickle him or something.

"Get away from me, freak," he says, slightly panicky, backing away.

"Oh, come on, Colly-poo, tell me who you like." He smacks my hand away, and glares.

"Colly-poo? What the hell was that?" I laugh.

"It's your new official nickname. Now tell me who you like."

"I don't like anyone. In case you hadn't noticed, you're the only person in our school I can even stand." I tisk.

"Now, I don't believe that's true. There are lots of people you'd probably dig if you gave them a chance." I pause before adding, "Or if they'd all stop being the idiots they are at the moment. But you're not going to distract me so stop trying. Tell me."

"There's nothing to tell." I raise my hand again, silently threatening tickling. Poor guy. He never should have told me how much he hates that.

"You're a horrible friend." I shrug.

"Still gotta tell me."

"You don't know her."

"Oh no?"

"She's not from our school."

"Where's she from then?"

"She's on my curling team." I try not to laugh.

I can't explain it, but even though he explained it to me and everything, the idea of him curling still sends me into a giggle fest. I also find it very wrong. I mean, Colin? On a team? No matter how I protest, he really doesn't like people. They're just not his thing. And I can't imagine him like, voluntarily spending time with a whole GROUP of people, forced to interact with them, and like, work together. Share a common goal and be bonded, in that freaky way I've never understood sports players on the same team seem to be.

"What's her name?"

"Katie."

"That's a hot and sexy name." He flicks me in the forehead.

"This is why I didn't want to start this with you."

I smile angelically. "I'm only going to get worse."

He sighs. "I know."

"But seriously, is she cool? Does she know you like her? Does she like you back?"

"Yes, and then two I don't know."

"But you're hoping that if I think you're hot she probably will too." He rolls his eyes, but laughs a little.

"Yeah, that's the dream."

"Well, I do."

"Really?" I nod.

"Sure. You're a hot guy. I mean, I'm not attracted to you, but I can tell if you're hot or not. It's like Kyle. I think he's good looking, but he's my brother. So, it's not the same way I'd look at Celery and go 'damn he's hot'. But I can recognize hotness in you and others who are. Know what I mean?"

"Vaguely."

"'Cause I'm just saying, yeah you're really nice looking, yeah I think lots of other people would agree with me, but no, I don't want to jump your bones."

He lets out a huge mock sigh of relief and I'm forced to kick him.

"I'm glad we had this chat," Colin says once he's finished pinching me in retaliation.

"Me too," I agree, rubbing my recently pinched arm.

"Anyway, if you get a girlfriend, and then start parading her around school every once and awhile, maybe people will snap out of this idiocy about us macking and we can start having normally screwed up lives again."

"First of all, I doubt either of our lives is ever going to be normal

screwed up normal or otherwise. Secondly, I'm not sure me having a girlfriend would really solve the problem. Assuming I'm right and they're all really just jealous we're friends, I don't see how it would help matters. We're still going to hang out." I fake a sniff.

"Unless you totally ditch me once you have a hot girlfriend." He rolls his eyes at my pathetic display.

"You're sad, sad, excuse for a man, Carrots." I grin.

"Says you." He raises his eyebrows.

"You know someone who disagrees?" I nod, wagging my own eyebrows at him.

He gets the grossed out face.

"You're talking about exactly what I hope you're not aren't you?" I nod vigorously.

"Sure am." He throws in a shudder.

"Ug."

"Get with times, man. It's hip to be gay."

"Gay I've got no problem with and you know it. Just not exactly dying to hear the details of anyone's sex life especially not yours."

"Who said I was going to give you details?" I scoff, pretending to be shocked and offended.

"Veiled comments are just as unwelcome," he assures me.

I grin evilly.

"You realize you really shouldn't have told me that, right?" He groans a little, a result of my expression and tone.

"Getting that message now, yeah."

"Buck up. It'll be great fun."

"For you maybe."

"Who else matters?"

Friday night now, and Colin's actually got a date thing with this girl of his. I mean, all joking aside, I was pretty damn impressed when he told me. I imagine walking up to someone and asking them out on a date's got to be a pretty unnerving bit of business. Glad I never had to do that myself. Not that telling Celery I was in love with him was exactly easy... okay, it was the damn hardest thing I ever did. But that wasn't the point. It's all your fault. Getting me off track with your... well, doing nothing as my brain wanders off of its own free will. Humph.

Anyway Colin. Colin on a date. Right now actually. As in, at this very moment, somewhere out there, Colin is on a date. With a girl. And they're like, doing date stuff. Don't really have much idea what that would be, but I'm hoping it's fun. Colin could use little more fun in his life. I mean, I'm a one man party there's no doubt about that but still, I'd like to see him branching out a little. Getting with the social interaction a little more. Broadening his relational horizons as it were.

Sorry. Kind of bored over here. Not much to do. Thus the wacky rambling. Not that I'm apologizing for rambling. Rambling in my opinion is very good. But I like to make at least SOME degree of sense. It can be a really low degree, but I like some level to be there. And don't look at me and say that's a fine theory too bad I didn't put it into action about 200 pages ago. I've had just about enough of your lip, you know that? If you don't watch yourself, I might stop talking to you altogether.

It's not an empty threat!

Okay so maybe it is. What do you want from me? Make a little sense once in awhile? Sorry. Ain't gonna happen.

So anyway, I'm about to get ready for bed. Homework's done, I've had a good ramble, and it's getting kind of late.

My walking out of the bathroom is perfectly timed to Colin coming through my window.

"Hey man." Startled, but also not, by his sudden appearance.

He wordlessly throws himself onto my bed.

"How'd the date go?" He glares at me.

"You have no idea how lucky you are to be gay."

I laugh, but then try to look sympathetic.

"That bad, huh?"

"High school girls are a plague to humanity."

"That's harsh."

He sighs. "I'm never leaving you again."

I smile, taking seat beside him.

"I'm touched."

"I'm serious. I'm done with girls." I raise my eyebrows, and he grins sheepishly.

"At least until University."

"Sounds like a solid plan."

"But, man, was it painful. She would like, NOT stop talking. Except, the talking? Not the cool kind of talking she's always done around me before. Nothing funny, or interesting. And then there was the giggling, and all the going to the bathroom. I mean, I don't know what the hell happened. She was normal until I asked her out." He sighs.

"Sorry it sucked, man," I say with total sincerity. Not that I'm exactly surprised. Mostly it goes back to my previous statements about him not liking most people. I mean, when your motto is 'some people just don't matter', what do you really expect?

"Yeah, well, I didn't even tell you the worst part." In a sick sort of way, I think he's starting to kind of enjoy this now. Misery can be really fun when you're whining about it to others.

"Enlighten me." He grins.

"Okay, so the movie itself total crap. But then, AFTER the movie, when we went to HMV so she could buy the soundtrack," he rolls his eyes in disgust, "I saw the Avril CD. And for a brief moment, I guess I thought I was with you, or like, someone who I could stand, 'cause I acted really excited, and did the 'oh my god it's Avril' thing. Which you would have understood, am I right?" I nod.

"And laughed along with you. Following that, tossage from the store," Colin's face says, 'vindication is mine'.

"But Katie? She gets all excited with me, but like, SERIOUS excited. She was all 'wow, you like Avril too?' and I'm like, 'no. GOD no. I think she's a loser. I just happen to really enjoy making fun of her.' And then she got really pissed off and wouldn't talk to me for the rest of the

night. Luckily, all that was left to do was take her home. And she only lived like, 5 minutes away, thank-god."

"That's rough, man." He sighs.

"Tell me about it. Worst night of my life."

I pat his leg.

"Cheer up, little trooper." It's a quote from the hilarious movie `Better Off Dead'.

He smiles at me. "Is your way of telling me I should consider killing myself?"

I roll my eyes, silencing the chuckle.

"No. It's my way of trying to cheer you up."

"Well thanks for trying. But it's late and I should probably just go." He's sitting up.

"Call me tomorrow?" He nods.

"Totally. Rock on, rock on."

"Peace out Avril," the standard non-standard handshake and he's out the balcony door.

On Saturday morning I call Colin to see how he is. He pretends to cry into the phone, demands I come over and more importantly bring lots of ice cream, and wonders aloud why women are so cruel. I'm unsympathetic, then I laugh, and finally I tell him I don't know. Then I get dressed and go over to his house.

"Did you bring ice cream?" He meets me at the door with this welcoming salutation.

"No."

"Then you can't come in." He shuts the door in my face, and I hear footsteps walking away.

I let myself in and when I catch up to him, I kick him in the shins (a quality move I learned from my big bro).

"What d'ya you want to do today?" I ask once I feel I've punished him enough with my silent treatment.

"Watch Oz." Did I forget to mention Colin's rather disturbing obsession with the show Oz?

"I don't know how you watch that creepy show." I say with a shudder. At this point, the shudder is just for effect, but the first time he told me, I shuddered for real.

"It's like the best show ever! I don't know how you can watch most of the crap on network TV that you do." This is an old argument, but I think we both sort of enjoy it, so we keep having it.

"But it's so violent and everyone's evil! Plus, you better not be dissing Buffy."

"Not only am I dissing Buffy, I don't know how you can DARE criticize a show you've never even seen. I bet you anything if you saw it you'd love it."

That's new. Usually he just calls me a tasteless loser and that's it.

"You're going to make me watch it now?" He raises his eyebrows.

"Didn't I sit through the entire third season of Buffy with you when you had bronchitis?" Did I forget to mention THAT too? Man. I'm really slipping.

"I was ill," I protest nobly.

"So! I'm in deep angsty emotion pain." I sigh.

"Okay, okay. We'll watch Oz. But only two episodes."

"Four."

"Let's save time and just compromise on three like you know we will." He grins.

"Deal."

So we watch three episodes. And by that point, I'm so hooked we watch two more. What can I say? I totally rescind my earlier comments. It's an awesome show. Everyone IS totally creepy and evil, and it's certainly graphic and violent and disturbing, but it's also one of the best shows I've ever seen. And I tell Colin this, and he laughs in my face while doing a frightening victory dance, and then I go home.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Eleven
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Thu, 20 Nov 2003 16:18:06 -0600

Home and studying in the afternoon of the following Monday with Jonas, when Kyle barrels into the kitchen, his face lit up with excitement.

"Dude?" Jonas asks, slightly wary.

Kyle just grabs him, kissing him hard. Jonas falls back into his chair, looking dazed.

I try to hold off a smirk.

Kyle sits down, giving off the major pleased with himself vibe.

"So are you just like high or something, or do you have an actual reason to be looking so damned pleased with yourself?" I eventually ask.

He grins.

"I think I have an idea!" Great, Kyle. Great.

"You wanna vague that up for us?" I mutter.

"What kind of an idea?" Jonas asks, ignoring me.

Kyle's grin falters a bit.

"Well, a good one I hope."

Jonas sighs.

"I meant, an idea about WHAT? What are we talking about here - the cure for cancer, ending world hunger... how to get the tape player in the Le Baron to work again?"

"An idea about your parents." This statement has Jonas straightening up nervously in his chair and blinking rapidly.

"Really?" He sorta croaks out.

Kyle nods.

"Really. It's, well I don't really know if it'll work, but it's an idea - which is more than we've had up to now, so..."

"What's the idea?" Jonas is still doing the nervous thing, but he's got a little bit of the cautiously hopeful thing going on as well.

"Well, just bear with me and listen to the WHOLE plan before you react, okay? 'Cause, you might not exactly love all the parts."

"Just tell me, Kyle, don't freak me out." Kyle takes Jonas' hand with his own, and stares at him until Jonas relaxes a little. He follows up the relaxation with a small smile.

"The idea is we tell them --" Jonas immediately tries to yank his hand away, but Kyle holds firm. "Jo, clam." Jonas takes a few deep breaths, and stops resisting Kyle's hold. "We tell them, but in a sort of round-about way. I was thinking that first, we could like, you know - ask them for their blessing kind of? Like, we sit down with them, have a little conversation, and work our way up to telling them how much we care for each other. And then we say something like, I don't know, 'it would really mean a lot to us to know you guys were behind this and that we had your support. 'Cause then, they're like, more involved, you know? And isn't that basically what they want? They don't want you going off and making some new life that has nothing to do with them, one they have no part in? Couldn't this maybe like, soften the blow some?" Jonas is quiet, taking in everything Kyle said.

Finally, a peace settles over his face, and he smiles at Kyle.

"It's good, Kyle," he praises. Kyle beams proudly.

"I thought it was."

They plan to have their whole announcement/blessing request hootenanny this coming Saturday, and emotions over the week are, understandably, a little all over the place. Sometimes their great and mutual nervousness will cause Jonas and or Kyle to snap at each other, or other people (like your humble narrator). On a few occasions they're quiet and withdrawn, not talking to each other or anyone else. Other times they're tender and attentive, sticking very close to each other and offering lots of good quality support. I'm happy to report that this is the more frequent mode.

I'll give this whole messed up situation one more point in the good stuff column for the way the twins have rallied around Jonas. I guess I always knew they liked him a lot, but I never realized how deep it went. Like, one thing I never knew is that sometimes back in the day he'd come over and neither me or Kyle were home, so Jonas would end up hanging around with the twins. It's actually something that still goes down apparently. But this isn't just me being my oblivious self, because even Jonas is exhibiting surprise over how much they care, and maybe more than that, just how willing they are to show it. It's really sweet. Since the porch incident,

they call him brother all the time and they've been hanging out with him more when I'm not around and Kyle's at University. I think they all get along really cool, and it's great to see.

In other, non Jonas and Kyle related news ('cause there happens to be a little bit of that too) Colin's curling season just recently finished up, and I went to a couple of his games with his dad. Who, may I just say, is a totally awesome guy. He's only like 37, and hilariously new age and stuff (almost as much of a granola head as my parents) and very, very supportive of Colin. Which is what I like to see. Parents treating their kids right. Having their backs. That's what it's supposed to be about.

On the night (and I'm not talking about the one where Chicago died) everything's pretty quiet and low key. By low key, I mean tense and uncomfortable, with the occasional burst of utter agony. And that's just what I felt sitting next to Jonas and Kyle and soaking up their vibes. To actually BE them I imagine would have been much worse.

They're over there as we speak, and it hasn't been so long I'm starting to panic, but it's been long enough that I'm beginning to feel a bit queasy, just from being nervous for this extended period of time. If I escape this year with my mental faculties intact (or, you know, what passes for intact in my particular case) and ulcer free, it'll be a miracle.

The twins are upstairs being nervous together (remember, they're the co-founders of the Jonas Fan Club) and keeping fingers and all other crossable parts crossed. Just when I'm starting to think, yeah, nervous upstairs with the twins sounds real good right about now, Kyle shows up.

I take a good look at him, and my insides do the turning to ice thing. He looks like death, and we're not talking about the warmed over kind.

"Kyle." He doesn't respond, instead he mechanically hangs up his jacket and removes his shoes.

"It didn't work?" He turns to me then, and the pain in his face takes my breath away.

"I don't think 'no' is a strong enough word." I can't bring myself to smile even a little bit at the Buffy quote. Though the total lack of humor on his face makes me wonder if Kyle even realized what he said.

"What happened?"

"We told them. They got mad. Jonas started to cry. They kicked me out. I asked him if he wanted to leave with me, he bolted up to his room, I left."

It takes me a good five minutes to even start putting together thoughts again.

"What the fuck?"

He sighs. "They think I'm taking advantage. 'Cause I'm older."

"Two years!"

Kyle shrugs. "Yeah but I'm 19 and he's 17 and I guess that matters. Anyway, they weren't happy they think I corrupted him. 'Cause he was always with girls before me and all. Apparently, their pro-gay stance doesn't extend to their own son." Kyle's tone is too tired to be bitter, too empty to be ironic, and I don't know how to comprehend my brother being so broken he can't even take refuge in sarcasm.

"Kyle, I don't..."

"It's okay, Care, don't worry about it. I'm heading to bed, see you tomorrow?" I just sort of nod uselessly, and watch him go up the stairs.

I stand there for awhile, my shock causing time to feel sort of suspended. That sense of suspension breaks when the other part of my brain returns to functioning order and directs my feet to follow after Kyle. When I get to his place Kyle's door is open so I walk right in (although okay, anything but a locked door wouldn't have stopped me). I do a quick Kyle search and find him lying on his bed. He's on his side and his face is blank. This is what Kyle does. It's his position when he's disappearing into himself. I haven't seen him do it since Jonas ran out of Dairy Queen on that whole bizarre Julie Christmas event thing. The thing that's making me stop and silencing my planned on the way up the stairs speech is that Kyle's not alone. The twins are standing on either side of the bed, their arms crossed. Nobody's talking.

As they finally notice my presence, the twins stand up a little taller and yet again their ever increasing height freaks me out. I swear they've grown another inch every time I see them. Even with all the extra hanging out with them I've been doing lately, I still feel like I'm totally missing them growing up. I suspect they sneak off and do it on the sly when I'm not looking.

"Did he tell you what happened?" Dave asks me. I nod.

"So you're here to help?" Jon this time.

"Uh, help?" They pull off the unison for a snort.

"Right help. Help us get Kyle off his ass." Dave's tone is hard.

"Is that, what?" And I thought the height thing was disconcerting.

"Dude," Jon gives Kyle a poke, "Get up, man!" Kyle blinks at them and then just stares.

"Guys, what are you trying to do? I don't know how to handle this but I don't think bullying Kyle's the answer," They hold onto their glares for a few more seconds, and then deflate, first Jon and then Dave half a second later.

"But," Jon starts.

"He just left Jonas there," Dave finishes.

That finally snaps Kyle out of it. Well, sort of. He sits up and sighs at them.

"He wanted me to, little bros. I, I asked him if he wanted to come with me he didn't. They're his parents," he sighs resignedly, "it's his home."

Dave raises up to his full height again, his outrage back in full force.

"But he's OURS! He should be with us. If his stupid parents can't even treat him right there's no way they get to have him while we miss him and worry and shit."

"Dave, that's not "

"What? How it works? Why the hell not?! You are by far not the only one who loves him, Kyle. You can't ask us to tolerate him in the kind of pain that "

"He chose to stay!" Kyle shouts, and then his own burst of anger dies and he just looks sad and sorry all over again.

Dave is temporarily silent, stunned by being yelled at. Kyle, and all of us really, never do that with them. We're just not the yelling sort of family. Jon however, takes over with his twin left off.

"Kyle, you know about their freaky control thing over him, you gotta know how like trapped he must be feeling. He LOVES you, you can't let him stay there." Kyle gets up, and puts his hands on Jon's shoulders.

"Jon, I love Jonas. I know you know that. Loving him means I have to respect his choices. I have to try to get that his relationship with his parents isn't something Jonas is ready to risk. I won't ask that of him." Jon has lost all of his fire and I think that bit of oomph was all that was

holding him and Dave together because now that acceptance of this situation is setting in, they're looking pretty thoroughly destroyed.

Me on the other hand, your humble narrator slash fearless leader, I've had just about enough.

"To hell with that!" All three of my brothers turn their head to me and look at me with identical expressions of like dumb blankness.

"Jonas IS ours. And I don't think any of us need to respect his decision to be an idiot. You don't let someone do harm to themselves out of `respect'. That's just crap. Jonas needs to be here, I don't want to watch another person I love try to survive in a home where he isn't accepted or valued. Right now, he needs to see how much he still matters. His parents aren't showing him that so we have to. Kyle, he needs to know how far you'll go to keep him with you how much you're willing to risk. Don't let fear of rejection get in the way of that. If Jonas can't do it himself then we better damn well go in there and get him out. We're the bloody cavalry! It's what we do." The end of my rant is met with intensified blankly blank looks.

"Sorry," I say after awhile. "I think I might haven been channeling Spike there near the end. But before that," I shake my head, "Kyle, you know I was channeling you. Tell me that isn't almost exactly what you would have said to me if the situation was reversed." More blinking and blankness happens, and then Kyle gets a baffled `oh damn you're right' look on his face.

"So I should... go then, huh?"

I don't waste time with a `god you're pathetic' look, just nod. "Yeah. A big yeah."

He looks resolved for a minute but it gets lost as a rather large wave of panic hits Kyle's face. He covers it and takes another step towards the door, but this is one the twins and I follow.

Dave speaks for us, "We're coming with you to make sure you don't wimp out," for a second Kyle looks like he's going to form a protesting guy face, but eventually just nods.

"Yeah. Okay. That'll probably be shamefully necessary."

And so, the four of us move out and in a close pack (for solidarity!) start the walk to Jonas's house.

When we get there, Kyle doesn't even bother knocking on the door, he just storms in, and the twins and I are close at his heels. A short pretty

looking women who is obviously Jonas' mother emerges from a study type room, startled by the noises of our arrival. The prettiness of her face is spoiled by the look that comes over it when she sees Kyle.

"We told you to leave him alone," she speaks coldly.

"Yeah, you did." Kyle nods.

"So why are you here?"

"Because I love him." With that, he brushes her aside and starts up the stairs two at a time.

I follow wordlessly, but the twins take the time to glare at her ferociously and mutter a few choice phrases under their breath.

I'm too busy being worried and distracted by all the unpleasant things that are going on in my stomach to really take notice, but it does register that this is the first time I've ever been in Jonas' home. Which is quite weird, when you think about it in terms of how long we've been friends, but not, when you think about it in terms of his relationship with his parents. Not that I ever pushed. I think I kind of wish I had, looking back at it now as we march towards Jonas' door. I mean, this is where he lives, sleeps, eats. It is his home, no matter how messed up it happens to be right now. So I guess I sort of wish Jonas could have shared that with me, shared the good in this house before now, so maybe I'd understand a little better why he's clinging to it so tightly.

Confronted with another door, Kyle takes the more hesitant route, knocking gently. No answer comes, so he turns the knob and opens the door a crack.

"Jonas?" he calls softly.

Nothing.

Kyle opens the door all the way, and takes a step into the room. More of a half step really. I hang back, and give the twins a look indicating they're to do the same.

Going by what is visible from where I'm standing and what Kyle isn't blocking, I'd say Jonas wasn't in his room. Kyle takes a few more steps inside, and I hear him murmur something. The words I don't make out, but the pain I do, and I can't stop myself from walking after him.

Kyle is standing in the middle of the room looking conflicted and slightly agonized, and standing in the farthest corner of the room, by his open closet, shirt in hand, is Jonas. My eyes flit over to his bed, and the open half packed duffle bag fills in the rest of the gaps.

Jonas was leaving. And I don't think there's any question where he was leaving to. So knowing this, and knowing Kyle must know it, I don't understand why so much pain is still in this room, threatening to choke the lot of us.

It takes Jon's abrupt, "Let's get the freak out of here already," to set us all in motion, but we do.

It's rapid and totally without ceremony, but we make it out of Jonas' house and onto the street. It's there that Jonas finally moves towards Kyle, and it's there that Kyle finally opens his arms up to him. The extent to which this is not over is great, but right now, watching them together like this, just holding each other, I have to believe things are going to be alright.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twelve
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Wed, 03 Dec 2003 12:32:06 -0600

Okay. So I maybe I was being a little bit optimistic. Maybe a more than a bit.

'Cause, it's been a week now, a day or two more than actually, and in all honesty friends, life is not going well. It's like all the tension and badness going on in the world of Kyle and Jonas set off a chain reaction and now the whole lot of us are fucked.

I'll start by telling you about the twins. These guys (continuing the trend of seeming to have grown up without my knowledge or permission) are suddenly getting pretty serious about the whole young adult thing, and for a bunch of weeks leading up to now, they both had serious crush action going on. I know this because they told me during one of our, they play video games, I try, and they mock my pathetic attempts sessions. And it was all going very well for them when it was a shared experience. They would alternate between sharing their feelings and making fun of each other and it was a good time had by all. But then they started actually going out with these girls. And that's when disaster struck.

I think even you lot can probably guess what happened. After all, whose little brothers are they anyway?

Yes. Very good. They freaked out. Supremely.

See, the thing is, once they got these girls to go out with them, they started spending all this time with said girls. Time spent not with each other. This lasted a few days, and then this past Friday, they ran into each other in the front hall, both heading out for dates or whatever. Now Friday has always sort of been the day of them, like Saturday was for me and Celery. They often go out, but always with each other. Or they'll stay in and have a gaming tournament or what have you. So when the running into each other with separate destinations things happened, they had a sort of meltdown. It wasn't very pretty. Believe me, I was there.

Anyway, now they're pulling at me and Celery and seem terrified to leave each other's side. Seriously, outside of the bathroom, I don't think I've seen them more than a foot away from each other since that night.

It's not just that either. They have this whole mass of guilt about what happened with Jonas. But I'll get more into that later.

'Cause it doesn't end with the twins. Kara (though she still may be a couple years shy of it) appears to have been hit with the angst and

moodiness teenhood inevitably brings. And I'll tell you, it's come as a bit of a shock. To all of us. As a rule, Kara's historically been one of the most collected calm little people I know. She's always been so self contained and serene. Away from most of the insanity that infects this household, quietly doing her own thing and taking care of herself. I don't even think I've ever seen her cry except for when Celery was leaving. And now she's all erratic and mood swingy. It's quite unsettling.

As for me, I haven't talked to Celery much lately and that never spells goodness in my life. So there's that, a large contributing factor to badness, and then also there's all the idiots at school who are still treating me like I'm some ho-bag traitor to Celery's memory for hanging out with Colin. Thus, I'm acting as rotten as the rest of the crew. With all the combined tension in the air plus regular stress from running a business, my parents are barely holding it together themselves.

Since the night we brought Jonas home with us, he's been sleeping in my old room. The one I moved out of after Kyle got his place over the garage and I took over his room. I don't know if they discussed it or not, but something about the hurt baffled look Kyle gets every night when Jonas heads for that door makes me think they didn't. Or if they did, it wasn't something they agreed on.

But it's not as bad as that makes it sound. They're still talking. And staying very close, even if they rarely actually touch. The almost touches didn't start until a couple days ago, so maybe progress is kinda being made. And talking's good. Lots of talking is really good. It's not just Kyle Jonas will talk to either. In some ways, he still seems really closed up about what happened with his parents, but at the same time, he's very open to talking about it. He even talked to Celery once, but neither of them would tell me what they discussed, and I didn't press. The only thing that worries me is how little emotion goes into his words when he does all that talking. It reminds me too much of me, but mostly worries me just because it's Jonas, and he's always had such a passion about him I'm afraid he might have lost.

I know it's only been a week, and that really, expecting things to be better already would have been pretty naive and all, but is it wrong of me to have hoped for that anyway? I love my brothers, and I want them to be okay. But they're really not. Jonas is mostly in his own little world, and judging by the looks on his face he forgets to hide, it's not a very fun one. Kyle's trapped up by guilt and worry and a good strong dose of self-loathing, and then of course there's the twins to consider as well.

Those girls they liked were a good distraction from all the guilt and responsibility they're feeling over what happened with Jonas, but since that all fell apart in the worst way, they've sunken lower and lower. I think Kara's problems may just be her picking up on everything bad that's

going on and not being able to escape it like she usually manages to because it's just too damn strong around her, not to mention everywhere. She barely has Mom to turn to these days, since worrying about all six of us and the bakery is leaving her spread pretty damn thin. Dad's never really been the deep 'share and grow' conversations kind of guy for any one of us. His love is clear and unquestionable, and that's usually enough. It's just this force throughout the house most of the time, and we can all feel it, making us stronger. But right now that's all messed up too, because he's so worried about everything he can't be calm for the rest of us.

I've always needed the grounding and strength Celery's presence in my life has offered me to maintain some level of peace and sanity, and with our lack of contact as of late in addition to all else that has been going down, I'm feeling sadly lacking in both those areas at the moment.

It really is a very sad state of affairs. And we're pretty much all feeling sorry for ourselves just to add final icing to the pain cake, so that isn't helping matters.

All in all, it's fairly safe to say nothing's coming up Vasskez.

Colin came over once this week, and he got this horrible look on his face the minute he walked through the door. When I asked him what was the matter, he turned the question back to me.

"I don't know, nothing I guess."

"Dude, this house is like, misery central. What the hell kind of emotional pollutants are you all putting out into the air?" I just raised my eyebrow at him, uncertain about how to answer such a question.

He was quiet for awhile, then came a sigh.

"You, I know, are upset because of not talking to Celery, the weirdness about everyone at school, and something about your older brother and his dreadly boyfriend. I'm going to assume that whatever's got you so twisted is the same thing that's got them sending out the bad vibes. But this is like, a family affair. What's up with the rest of your crew?"

I shrugged.

"Lots. The Jonas and Kyle stuff mostly. It's big and bad and doing a number on all of us. The twins are having some issues of their own separate from the big bad which is just making dealing that bit harder. Even my sister Kara is freaking. My parents are just trying to hold it all together."

Colin nodded.

"It's bad, huh? Everything with your bro and Jonas?" I nodded shortly. "I didn't know, man. Not that it was this bad. Could have told me, eh? You know I'm always up for a good vent."

I smiled sadly. "Do know that, man, really. But I just haven't really been feeling like one. This is more of a brood and feel miserable kind of deal. At least all the me stuff is. The Jonas and Kyle thing? It's a lot more serious than that. None of us know what to do, and we're all thinking pretty damn hard on it. Yeah, it's bad."

He put one arm around me, and smiled in that "I'm here for you" way. Took me a couple seconds, but I smiled back.

And that was like, maybe the only good thing that's happened all week. One almost happy moment with Colin, and the rest has been pretty much shit. I don't know what the solution is, and the rest of them are as clueless as me. It's like we're all waiting for something to happen, but none of us know what, and so far, whatever it is, it sure seems shy.

Monday now and school is the thing. I walked here with Jonas, but he disappeared off somewhere shortly after we entered the building, so I don't know where he is now.

At the moment I'm sitting with Colin on one of the bench things our school has hanging around all over the place in all the alcove type deals. We're not doing much, just sitting and not really talking, but every once in awhile when someone passes us they'll glare or get a really ugly look on their face while staring at us.

Colin usually tells them to fuck off or hit the road, but I don't exactly feel compelled to ask him to stop. I mean, I don't really consider us to be the ones needing a behavior adjustment.

For the most part, the glarers have been people I only sort of know, the ones I never got more than fractionally close to or that I knew only slightly through Celery, so it doesn't really bother me a huge much. But when Brian walks by, and looks at me for a second, only to turn away like he can't stand to look at me, it hurts.

"This is getting so old," I say bitterly.

"I know."

"How do we stop it?"

"Don't know that."

I sigh. Colin reaches over and squeezes my shoulder.

"Don't let it get to you, man."

I shake my head.

"How can I not? He was supposed to be my friend. And I'm sick of saying he should have known better but that doesn't make it any less true. He should have known. They all should have."

Colin nods. "I know."

The day doesn't improve from there, and when I meet up with Jonas to head home, he's looking pretty rough.

"You okay, bro?" I figure my tone sort of implies I mean in addition to everything else that's been making him not okay all the past week and up till now.

"Just really mixed up." I take his hand. It's a totally brotherly thing. Jonas smiles a bit and squeezes back.

"Something new?"

He shrugs.

"My parents called me."

"What?"

"This morning at school. They," he takes a breath, "They wanted me to come over, you know, to talk and have dinner. I can't even tell you how weird it was being invited over to dinner at my own house." I don't even bother attempting to get my mind around such a feeling.

"You're going to do it?" He looks afraid to answer me, and that in itself is answer enough.

"I see."

"Carrots, I need to." He speaks quietly.

"Kyle's probably going to flip." Not like he doesn't already know that.

"Yeah, I know."

"But it's necessary?" He nods.

"Okay. You've got my full support. I'll back you with Kyle if you need it."
He smiles gratefully.

"Thanks, Carrots," I give his hand one more squeeze and then let go.

"Least I can do, bro."

We get home, and try to do our homework. Jonas is having trouble 'cause he's so nervous and jumpy, and I'm having a rough time concentrating sitting next to him, soaking up all his vibes.

An end to our suffering finally arrives when Kyle gets home.

He shouts a hello and then saunters into the kitchen. Jonas stands up to face him. His expression makes Kyle instantly wary.

"What?" he asks like he knows he doesn't want to hear the answer.

"I'm going to see my parents." I see Kyle's hands forming tight fists, but his face remains calm.

"When?"

"Tonight, they invited me over for dinner." Kyle raises his eyebrows, but leaves the question unsaid. Jonas sighs. "They called me at school."

Kyle does the half nod thing, too upset to pull off the full I guess. Too preoccupied clenching his jaw and willing himself to keep it together. Outwardly at least.

"Just like that?"

"No Kyle! Not `just like that'! But I have to go." Jonas just barely manages to keep the panic in his eyes out of his voice.

"Alone?" Guilt adds its name to all the other bad emotions already taking residence in Jonas.

"Yes."

Kyle lets out a noise disturbingly like a growl and turns away.

"No fucking way," he mutters.

"Kyle! Please don't do this to me I have to see if there's something salvageable there. They're my PARENTS."

When Kyle doesn't turn back around, Jonas takes the few steps over and

turns him around roughly, forcing Kyle to look at him. His eyes plead with Kyle.

"Kyle, I love my parents. I can't just turn my back on that." He stops for a moment, having lost his steam, but then gets it back and continues with new fervor, "And don't you even TRY to tell me we wouldn't be having this exact same discussion if the situation was reversed. So your parents are great about all this what if they weren't? Are you honestly going to try and stand here and tell me you'd just be able to walk away? It'd never happen, Kyle. I know how much they mean to you I see it every day. And maybe it's harder for you because you haven't really seen how important my parents are to me, at least not in practice or for good reason, but they ARE. The point is, I know what your parents mean to you, and I'd never ask you to give that up. Please don't ask it of me."

In my mind, I silently beg Kyle not to do something stupid. To just let Jonas do this. He has to see it's what Jonas needs to do.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"My caveman moment has passed," Kyle says with a rueful smile. Then he shrugs.

"Jonas, you don't need my permission to do whatever you need to do to make things alright again. I want you to be happy. Truly happy. I'd be a million different kinds of liar if I said I didn't understand why you need your parents in your life to be that. I don't like that it's alone, or so soon, and I wish I knew why they suddenly made this move, but I can't and won't try and stop you. Love you, man, I just want what's best for you."

Jonas' face is let on low beam.

"I love you too, Kyle." Then it's hug time.

"You guys really need to get a room," I say dryly when hugging becomes kissing.

"You know you love it," Kyle says with a grin.

"Yeah whatever."

Jonas leaves a couple hours later, after getting a fierce good bye kiss from Kyle and a passionately delivered reminder that if anything goes wrong or he just suddenly feels like he can't handle stuff, Jonas is to call or come back immediately. Once he's gone, Kyle turns to me and shrugs.

"Care, I'm gonna need..." I nod.

"Say no more. Go, brood. Break things if necessary just make sure they're yours and don't an immense amount of monetary or emotional value."

Once Jonas's been gone three hours and there's been no word of any kind, Kyle takes his brooding into my room. I think he really did break all his none precious slash highly expensive items back in his apartment.

The twins are in their room, getting their frustration out in the way of violent video games. When they got home from practice and we told them where Jonas was, they wanted to form another vigilante rescue party, but I eventually talked them down from that. Kyle couldn't help 'cause at the time he was too busy punching a wall.

"What do you think is taking so long?" He's pacing back and forth, occasionally wringing his hands.

"I don't know. I guess there's a lot they need to sort through."

"I can't stand the waiting," he mutters darkly.

"That's glaringly obvious." He stops the pacing thing and stares at me, almost glaring. Then sighs.

"Nice try."

I smile. "I thought it was worth a shot." You know. Keeping him distracted by being mad at me for awhile. It's worked for me in the past. Beats pacing.

"Almost worked for a second."

I ponder other options. "We could play scrabble."

"The real kind?" Just another reminder of Celery, and it causes a flash of pain.

Kyle is immediately apologetic.

"Sorry, I didn't think it was bad to..."

"It's not usually. Just sometimes. You know, lately. We haven't talked much. I miss him in a whole different way and handling it hasn't exactly worked out well so far."

"Call him."

I sigh. "I have, I do. So does he. That's not the problem. We're never home at the same time anymore. Our lives are pulling us in different directions, again." Kyle walks over to the bed, and takes a seat beside me.

"I thought you guys were doing okay. I'm sorry I should have been paying more attention." I shrug.

"S'okay. You've got your own issues. Being a little distracted from Carrots morale watch is totally understandable." He leans against me for a second, softer than a push, more comforting. I lean back and then we separate a little again.

"You're looking forward to Spring Break though, right?" My grin is automatic.

"Of course!" Kyle laughs.

"That's the C1 I know and love." My grin softens into a smile.

"Mostly it's just me letting myself feel bad. Indulging. It really hasn't been that long. And soon I'll get to see him. I shouldn't complain, or feel entitled to. Besides, what's going on with Jonas is so much bigger. I have to stay focused."

"Oh, is it better to dwell on other people's problems instead of your own?" I give him the 'don't be a goof' smile.

"Focus as in helping, not focus as in dwelling. Though okay, a little dwelling and general broodiness may also be involved."

"Same old Carrots." I raise an eyebrow, and he smiles in that older, wiser, slightly more world weary brotherly way. "You think we're ever going to grow out of hiding from the serious stuff with jokes?" I think about it for awhile, and then just shake my head.

"No." I smile at him sadly. "I don't think we will."

He's calm for a few minutes after that, but then Kyle gets up and starts pacing again, so I figure it's time to try another tack for keeping him distracted.

"Kyle, what do you and Jonas do?"

"Do?"

"Yeah, when you're alone and just hanging out. I mean, I know you have the paintball thing and... Chinese checkers, but that can't take up all your

time." He shrugs.

"We don't do much. Mostly we're just together and that's what counts. We talk a lot. About the future, what we want out of life, places we want to see, things we want to do... In a lot of ways, nothing's any different than it was before, except we're braver now."

"What do you mean?" Forgetting about being distracting now and simply interested.

"It's like, before, we'd have to handle stuff differently. We'd make plans in that same dreamy way we do now, but before we'd either avoid the reasons our plans always seemed to include the other or joke about it. Now we're more honest, we admit at least most of the time it's just because we want to be together. No matter where or what," The look on his face tells me Kyle's gotten a little lost, but I think that's good. In times like these, it's important that he remembers just how important Jonas is.

Kyle doesn't say anything more, and there's nothing I feel the need to add, so we just sit there, as the minutes pass, waiting for Jonas' return.

And then suddenly we're not waiting anymore, because Jonas is standing in the doorway before us, and he looks remarkably close to smiling.

"Jo?" Kyle asks hesitantly.

"They said they were going to try!"

"What?" Jonas takes a step into the room.

"That's what they wanted to talk to me about they weren't trying to convince me I was making a mistake they were asking for time. To get used to it, to accept it. ACCEPT it, Kyle they're going to try." He looks so happy.

"Is that... I mean," Kyle is having more trouble getting on the happy train.

"It's not perfect, but it's something. Kyle, it's more than they've ever done. And that means something. It means they're acknowledging that what I feel is real don't you see? If it isn't real, why would they have to deal with it? Just trying is enough to let me know they're taking me US seriously."

"That's great, Goldie," Kyle says, smiling finally, and walking over to put an arm around Jonas.

"Do you know why they're taking me seriously?" he asks Kyle.

"Um, 'cause you love me so damn much?"

He smiles affectionately.

"Well yeah, but they didn't really get that until I left with you. It took awhile for it to sink in, but they eventually realized if I was serious enough about you to leave home something they probably thought I'd never do then maybe I wasn't living in as much of a fantasy as they wanted to believe."

Kyle shakes his head a little, the start of a rueful smile on his lips.

"What?" Jonas wants to know, tugging on Kyle's hand.

"Well, it's just and not that this is what I'm saying you did exactly running away isn't often seen as the mature adult thing to do. It just strikes me as a bit strange that it was the bailing that made them take you seriously."

"Bailing?"

"Poor choice of words and you know I don't see what you did like that, I'm just saying, from their point of view, you know?"

He nods. "It could have made me seem even more childish and unbalanced." Jonas looks a little queasy at the thought.

"Could have, but didn't." Kyle says reassuringly.

"So let's hear it for running away?" Jonas's expression is still clouded.

"Not running. Call it walking at a brisk pace."

Jonas looks at Kyle lovingly.

"Never would have had the courage to do it without you."

Kyle waves him off. "Wasn't just me."

"Damn right, where's my credit?" I demand irately.

Jonas turns to me with a blinding smile.

"Thanks, brother." I smile back.

"Don't mention it."

"Mention it to us," the twins come out of nowhere. Jonas spins around, startled, and then grins.

"Love you, bros."

They beam at him.

"Cool," Dave says.

"You better," Jon mock grumbles.

Then there's some arm punching and general silliness. Nothing like brotherly love.

Another week passes, for the most part, a lot less painfully than the last. And although, considering last week, it really wouldn't take much for that to be true, but I'll give you a run through, and then you can just like, take it for what it is. Things are still semi-rocky with Jonas and Kyle, but since the meeting with his parents and their grudging almost acceptance of their relationship, things have been getting better. And the twins have been seen like, in separate rooms from each other and they've even talked to those girls again, so that's progress. Kara's descent into teenage angst seems to be over for the time being, and the olds haven't been shooting any `you're making us prematurely grey' glares our way lately either. Everyone at school's still acting pretty damn stupid around Colin and me most of the time, but with all the different ways at my disposal of torturing him, and the distraction that brings, I'm handling it a lot better. I haven't really talked to Celery much, but we've been e-mailing and stuff, so it's not too bad. Anyway, the list could go on, but you get the general idea.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Teaser
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Wed, 24 Dec 2003 15:01:47 -0600

Friday. 8:35. The cafeteria. Calvin High school. Winnipeg. Manitoba.
The world, the Universe.

"Yo," I mumble to Colin, sliding into a chair across from him.

"Yau," He corrects cheerfully. You know, like that annoying visa commercial?

I roll my eyes heavenward.

"What's with the crab action?" He demands.

"It's nothing," I shrug.

"And here I was thinking it was something."

"Just, like, I still haven't really talked to Celery. And it's been like, a long time. I guess I'm just fiending for a little contact," He smiles a bit, probably cause of my use of the word 'fiending'. Oz reference.

"Haven't you called him?" He then asks, after he's done smiling.

"Yeah, but he's always at work, or I'm out somewhere. We keep missing each other. It sucks. I mean, we've left messages and all that, but that doesn't cut it you know? I want him LIVE. Live and in person would be nice, but if I can't have that - I at least want live." He nods.

"Understandable. But like, you're not out ALL the time. Neither is he I can only imagine. Can't you like, coordinate yourselves or something? Make some kind of a plan to both be home at the same time or whatever?"

"We usually do that yeah, but it just hasn't happened."

"So just keep calling him then. Eventually, he will be home."

"I guess,"

Colin shakes his head.

"Dude, what're you like, nervous? Explain to me how that's possible," He's incredulous.

"It's just, it's been a bit weird between us lately. The last couple times

we HAVE talked, it was a bit like, strained."

His face clearly displays Colin's genuine concern. "I'm sorry to hear that man,"

I smile, gratitude like.

"It's okay, I mean, it's not like we were fighting or anything. And I guess most of it is just me being stupid and nervous for no reason. But one weird thing - the very last time we talked, he told me he liked..."

"That's fucked up - even so you've gotta make the call," throwing down his own Oz quote.

"I know..." I drift off.

"Dude, seriously! Is this like a rejection thing? You don't want to be the one to make the first move? Cause, um, news flash - you're MARRIED to the guy. You have his name tattooed to your wrist for fucks sake! I don't really think a phone call is going to like - give away your hand at this point - I'm pretty sure he already has something of an idea about how you feel. "

"You may have something there," my voice wanting to be grudging but coming off more amused.

"Sure I do. So, you'll call him?" I nod.

"Yeah, I mean, I would have eventually anyway, or he'd have called me, but yeah. I'll call him. Tonight," Colin nods approvingly.

"Good."

The next morning, we meet up again, and Colin's first question to me is, "Did you call him?"

I nod.

"Yeah."

"And was he there?"

"No."

"Did you leave a message?"

"No," Colin doesn't bother concealing his disapproval. "It doesn't help! I call him -- and he's not there. So I leave a message. He calls back --

but I'm not there. He leaves a message. Then I do, then him. It's just going in circles,"

"Okay," Colin concedes the point, switching into supportive friend mode.

It helps improve my mood, as does this thought,

"Besides -- he's coming soon. SO soon Colin. Not even two weeks and he'll be here. And then it won't matter. He'll be here and everything will be fine," Colin nods and briefly squeezes my arm.

"I'm sure it will be," but far off in a quiet place deep inside, I sense a doubt in both of us.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Thirteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Fri, 26 Dec 2003 22:01:48 -0600

On the night of Celery's expected arrival, I'm literally bouncing with excitement. Hours away. See him. Touch him. Hear him. Be with him. Love him so much.

We managed to talk once earlier in the week, though it was frustratingly short. He told me he loved me, missed me, and couldn't wait to see me. I told him the same. That was pretty much it.

But it's like I told Colin, as soon as I see him none of that's going to matter anymore. I'm putting any doubts I have about that far away into nothingness where they belong. He'll be here with me again so very, very soon. And then everything will be good again, I know it will.

Jonas interrupts my bouncing and streaming consciousness with the statement, "Time to go Care."

"Go?" I stare at him blankly. He shakes his head in half amused exasperation.

"Yeah, like to the airport? To pick up Celery? You know how his flight comes in at nine?" I nod. "It's almost time, so we're going now to get him. Got all that, should I have been talking slower?" I've snapped out of myself enough to smack him on the shoulder.

"Asshole."

He grins, totally unrepentant. "Whatever. Just get ready, everyone else is downstairs already."

"Okay, just let me check my messages. I think maybe he left me some kind of countdown thing on my cell," like he did at Christmas. Only then, we were talking live, he had a lay over in Regina, and he called me, and until he got on the plane, we counted down minutes together.

I glance at my watch. 8:10. A shiver of pleasure and anticipation runs down my spine. So soon.

I wander over to my cell phone, and get into my voice mail. Just like I thought. One new message. I hit one, and it starts to play,

"Hey Care, can't talk long. I just wanted to let you know I'm working a lot next week, so I don't think we'll be able to hook up. I know it means more of the message game, which totally sucks, but we're really busy right

now. Hope you aren't mad. Um, you can reach me this weekend if you want hope you do but I might be snowboarding on Saturday, so that's where I'll be I don't answer, okay? And if we don't get through this weekend, maybe you could call me like Thursday or something? I should be home around ten eleven for you - if you don't mind waiting up. Sorry I didn't catch you, but I guess you're out somewhere. Love you."

My knees give out, and I collapse onto my bed. After about 10 minutes, no doubt confused about my lack of arrival, Jonas and Kyle are sent up in the rescue party slash get the hell down here capacity.

They stare at me in confusion and mounting worry as I simply continue to lie there motionless, still too stunned to cry.

"Care?" Kyle's voice quivers with uncertainty.

"He's not coming," I announce softly.

They just stare at me in disbelief.

"What?" Kyle finally sputters. I shrug, still with the numb.

"He has to work... and stuff." More staring.

"What the hell do you mean he's working?! He can take a week off,"

"I guess he couldn't,"

Kyle rolls his eyes.

"Bro, the boy would QUIT any job that got in the way of seeing you. You must know that."

"He likes this job. And he has a lot of responsibility. He probably just doesn't want to let anyone down." My protestations sound weak, especially to my own hurt and confusion.

"Something's going on," Kyle says, shaking his head and standing up. "I'm calling him right now." He starts walking out towards the phone, but I snatch it out of his reach.

"He's not home. He was on his way out, it's why he left the message. Anyway, I don't," I sigh. "I don't want anyone calling him and like, guilt him into something. If he can't come he can't come and that's it."

Now they're staring at me in disbelief for a whole nother reason. No way either of them buys me being so calm about this. Just letting it go. I

don't really believe the act myself, but I need to keep it up until I'm alone again at least. I don't particularly feel like sharing a group cry about this right now. Though that'll probably come later.

"Look guys, we can talk about this more tomorrow or something. I'm really tired right now and I think I just want to go bed. Be by myself for awhile."

They don't look very happy about it, but eventually Jonas and Kyle do what I asked, mumbling something about telling the others as they go. I'm grateful. Saves me from seeing my own shock and hurt reflected in others faces.

I stay lying on my bed, too much stunned still to decide if I'm more mad or hurt, and too drained to attempt to figure it out. So great is my lack of energy, I don't even manage to reach over and find some depressing music to play.

I spend most of Spring break (I feel completely understandably) hiding in my room listening to depressing music. Alternating that with the occasional bit of really angry music, when it suits my mood. I haven't returned Celery's message, but I mean, come on. The guy leaves a 30 second message canceling a week we were supposed to spend together, and I'm supposed to feel guilty about that? I don't think so bub. And furthermore, he hasn't called me either, so it's not like I'm alone in this. Though, alone is very much what I feel.

I just don't understand how he could just, not come.

"Hey Care, can't talk long. I just wanted to let you know I'm working a lot next week, so I don't think we'll be able to hook up. I know it means more of the message game, which totally sucks, but we're really busy right now. Hope you aren't mad. Um, you can reach me this weekend if you want hope you do but I might be snowboarding on Saturday, so that's where I'll be I don't answer, okay? And we don't get through this weekend, maybe you call me like Thursday or something? I should be home around ten eleven for you - if you don't mind waiting up. Sorry I didn't catch you, but I guess you're out somewhere. Love you."

I mean, shit. Snowboarding? And okay work but SNOWBOARDING? He's turning me down to go snowboarding? And this he tells me in a 30 second phone call?

Talking about it is doing nothing for me. Like, everyone seems to think it's really encouraging that I've BEEN talking about, but it's not making me feel any different. Confused, mad, hurt, sad, and a lot more confused. This is me, talking about it be damned.

In some ways, I'm still functioning alright though, I guess. Still working in school, still sharing the occasional laugh with Colin. Still trying to keep quality bonding time going with the twins, still spending lots of time just chillaxing with Jonas and Kyle.

So in some ways, I'm almost fine. The part of me that's gotten used to doing stuff on my own, it's still just doing that. The rest of me though, the big, majority of me that's completely Celery centered, has seen better days.

But like I said, if I don't deserve to feel a little sorry for myself about this, well, I don't know. And deserving or not, I'm sure not about to stop sulking about this. And I'm sure as hell not going to be the one who calls first. He started this damnit.

It's not like January either. We at least talked about that. Well okay, first we fought about it, and then there was silence, but we did at least have some kind of forum. But this... he didn't even discuss it with me. If I wasn't so pissed off, I'd probably be able to take a minute, and realize how totally unlike him this is, and then I'd get to wondering if something's wrong, but the fact is, I AM so pissed off. So reason and logic can be damned too.

"Mr. Vasskez!"

Oh shit. Teacher glaring at me. That's what I get for doing my brooding in the middle of History class.

"Uhummm... E?" Blinking and straightening up in my desk. I hear Jonas snicker behind me. The bastard.

"I ask that you please do your day dreaming on your own time. For the moment, focus your attention on the lecture."

Bah.

"Sure," I say agreeably. Get glared at for a few more seconds, but then Mr. Carter starts droning again, and I promptly go back to brooding.

Day dreaming indeed. I should be so lucky.

Jonas thumps me on the back as we walk out of class.

"You realize if you keep all this brooding up me and Kyle are going to start calling you Angel, or possibly just Danger Mousse." I glare at him, but I think the amused look in my eyes may have lost the glare some of its credibility.

"Are you saying I don't have a right to brood?"

He shrugs.

"Not exactly. I do think you should call him though you know half of what's wrong with you is simple lack of Celery exposure. You're like a little plant that's wilting due to lack of water and sunlight," I almost want to kill him for that cutesy voice he uses for the last part.

Almost.

"He should call me," I pout firmly. As I have so many times in the past week and a half.

"He's probably wiggled, I mean, you never returned his message. I bet he thinks you're really pissed." Not like we haven't had this conversation before or anything...

"I AM!"

Jonas sighs. "I'm sure there's more to his explanation than what the message said if you'd only call him and talk it through. Anyway, wouldn't venting your rage at him be like, therapeutic or something?" That's a new angle. I bet him and Kyle plot about this kind of thing. Brainstorming arguments to force me into calling. Or at least taking off the calls to Celery ban and letting one of them do it.

"I'll get around to it eventually," I say, very blasé. "Right now I'm still firmly in pout and brood mode. Which I'll have you know is a mode I feel completely entitled to. So there." Jonas smiles faintly.

"I'm with you on that, we're all mad he didn't come you're not the only one who was looking forward to a week with Celery but you're hurting yourself too, that's the problem. I just mean, are you ENJOYING your broody existence? Cause if you are by all means, brood on. But if you're not, why not just call him, yell at him, have him explain and apologize, and then just get on with your life?"

I sigh at Jonas.

"Listen man, it doesn't work like that for us. We have to work our way up to a confrontation with many weeks or possibly even months of obsessing about things. Keeping in mind most of our problems have been about stupid misunderstandings. We know this, and yet, every time another one comes up, we still end up doing this ridiculous little dance around each other. Face it dude, we're slow. Like, REALLY slow. Let's not forget how long it took us to get around to talking about the fact that we were in love with each other in the first place. We're just too used to taking a really long time

to get around to stuff. There's no hope for us on the resolving things quickly front. That may be what you and Kyle are able to do, but Celery and I just don't operate like that."

He snorts. "So this is a like, it's broke but because we've been doing it so long it's pretty much a tradition, and changing it might upset the precious balance, we aren't going to fix it thing?" I grin.

"Yeah. I guess so."

He shakes his head. "I want it stated for the record that I think you're both totally insane." I pat his shoulder reassuringly.

"That was entered long ago."

"Just so long as it's written down somewhere."

It's evening and I'm lying with my eyes half closed on the couch, sort of watching TV with the twins. They're actually quite hilarious. They're a real team you know. And they've got that youthful exuberance thing going for them. Plus they're like just recently credible teenagers right, being 15, so they think they're pretty hot stuff. You can tell. That's also very hilarious. The hilarious I said before I meant as actual hilarious. In the smart mouth remarks and quick wit sense.

We're supposed to be bonding, all watching TV together is bonding I guess. But mostly, I've been watching them. I sort of gave up on the TV a little while ago, watching them more closely, and something's started to happen to me.

Cause, they're so young seeming you know? So full of life, as cheesy as that sounds. And of course, like everything, in the least surprising twist ever, they're starting to remind me of me and Celery. Right now, they're on the floor, kind of shoving each other every once and awhile, tossing friendly insults back and forth, making fun of what's on TV and each other.

And in this moment of watching them, all I want is to be able to turn to Celery and have him smile at me. Cause I know if he was here he'd know exactly what I'm thinking, and he'd just grin and make some comment about the good old days or something else intentionally corny and we'd both laugh. But he's not here for me to turn to, so the moment is passing, and all I can do now is cry. The hurt especially bad because he's not here, but he should be. Was supposed to be.

My sniffing gets the attention of the twins pretty quick, and they both like rush me. It's two sided attack, Jon on my right and Dave on my left, each hugging me, not really knowing what's going on, but doing the only thing they can probably think of, hoping they'll luck into making it

better.

Turns out it works out great. I love my brothers. I love them for who they are, right now, for the great little people they are. Not just for what they remind me of. And it's so incredibly far past time I started to appreciate that.

On Friday night, I go over to Colin's. He drags me up to his room excitedly.

"What's up dude?" I say, laughter in my voice, finding, as I usually do, that being around Colin is excellent medicine for my recent and somewhat perpetual bad mood.

"I have the most awesome news you'll ever hear!"

"Yeah, what's that Cauliflower?"

His face darkens instantly.

"You have no idea how much I've been hoping that wasn't ever going to occur to you."

I smile smugly. "That's pretty much why it's so fun. But I mean, I'm kind of ashamed of myself really, it took me way too long."

"Carrots, I promise you, the only shameful thing would be for you to actually use that name."

"There's no chance of that not happening." I assure him.

He sighs. "Fabulous."

He looks so dejected, I have to laugh. "Oh cheer up. You were practically bouncing off the walls a minute ago, what's the big?"

"I'm not telling you." He pouts shamelessly.

"Don't be like that... listen, if you tell me, I promise I won't occasionally shorten the nick to flower,"

He looks positively horrified, "You wouldn't."

"Please."

"If you're not nice to me I'm not taking you along." He warns.

"Taking me along where?" Like my question has reminded him, he gets all

excited and delighted looking again.

He jumps up and down a little bit. I kid you not. He's that excited.
This is damn funny.

"That was girly," I can't help but chuckle out.

He glares at me.

"Don't make me tap my proceeding statement."

I roll my eyes,

"Colin, what?" He holds a hand out, and does the `breathe in, breathe out' thing.

When sufficiently calmed, he drops the bomb,

"I got us ticked to see Avril Lavigne!"

"What?! I thought they were sold out?!"

"I won them!"

"That IS totally awesome!" I exclaim. "You're the man."

He grins proudly.

"I know."

"How'd you win them?"

"Radio," He shrugs. "But listen, I've been thinking about it. We have to make T-shirts."

"T-shirts?"

"Of course! They'll both have `rock on rock on. Peace out. Avril' on the back, and then on the front, mine can say `two words: tour bus' and yours has to say `I'm with the skater boi'."

I laugh. "That's great Colin."

He nods. "And we'll be wearing ties obviously."

"Oh well yeah, I mean, that goes without saying." Suddenly I get a silly grin on my face, reality settling in.

"Damn! We're going to an Avril Lavigne concert!"

His grin is every bit as silly as mine. "I know! It's going to be the most hilarious night of our lives. And they're really good seats, so most likely we'll be surrounded by REAL fans, who are going to get really pissed off at us probably."

"What with all our mocking, loud awful singing along and pretending to cry on each other's shoulders while we sob `this is the best night of my life!' over and over?"

He beams at me and for a minute I think I'm about to get hugged.

"Exactly." Pure happiness in his voice.

The happy because, well, having someone who gets you is like, one of the best things in the world. And I've always been lucky enough to have that with Celery, and it still makes me want to beam at him whenever he does it, but for Colin, this is all pretty new sometimes.

I give him a hug. He rolls his eyes at me, but I'm sure he knows full well he's not fooling me.

"We're going to have a shamefully good time." He smiles.

"I know."

Colin decides to walk home with me, and we take a long windy way back, talking and laughing and generally disturbing the peace. When we finally make it back to my place, Colin and I burst through the door, arms thrown across each other shoulders, singing I'm with You at the top of our lungs.

We're right in the middle, uproariously exclaiming, "It's a DAMN cold night!" when we walk into the living room and my eyes land on something that instantly robs me of my ability to speak or move.

Though I can barely believe it, there he sits. Arms crossed and eyes grey. Blonde hair all tufty and mussed, as beautiful as I've ever seen him, despite the developing scowl.

"Hey baby."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Fourteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Thu, 01 Jan 2004 19:19:48 -0600

We're right in the middle, uproariously exclaiming, "It's a DAMN cold night!" when we walk into the living room and my eyes land on something that instantly robs me of my ability to speak or move.

Though I can barely believe it, there he sits. Arms crossed and eyes grey. Blonde hair all tufty and mussed, as beautiful as I've ever seen him, despite the developing scowl.

"Hey baby."

.....

"Who the hell are you?" Colin demands, looking mildly frightened but glaring at Celery suspiciously with narrowing eyes.

"Who am I?" Celery scoffs with completely un-contained malice.

I continue to stand there, stunned.

"Are you okay?" Colin asks me, turning me around by my shoulders and peering at my face.

Celery makes a sound not unlike a growl and jumps up. I still can't quite believe anything about this scene, but it's clear to me that I better speak up soon, cause if I don't, there's likely to be some kind of a rumble.

"It's okay Celery," I like croak, "He's my friend. Colin, this is Celery, Celery, Colin," They do a half-circle around each other, facing off like angry wolves both defending what they believe is their territory. That would be ME for all of you slow ones out there. I know there are a lot of you.

"What are you doing here?" Colin gruffly inquires.

Celery simply snorts and doesn't bother to answer. Instead he walks over to me and runs his fingers along my neck up to my cheek. My body practically screams MORE at the teasing contact, but I am still managing some small degree of brain function. And that remaining bit of my brain would very much like to know the answer to Colin's question.

So I take a step away from him.

"Celery?" I plead for some kind of explanation. He smiles sadly.

"I told you I was coming."

"What? No you didn't!" He's wearing a patient expression, but it doesn't relax me any.

"Yes I did. Months ago. And then a million times after that, practically every time we've talked. `I can't wait to see you during Spring Break'. I don't know how many times I must have said it. Did you actually forget?" Is that his heart I hear breaking?

And yet, I find myself staring at him in total shock and bewilderment.

"Spring Break," I shake my head. "Celery, Spring Break was over a week ago. I'm not the one who forgot," I don't try to hide the pain in my voice.

Celery is in total disbelief.

"That's why you haven't been calling? Cause you thought I'd somehow ditched you?" Pain and regret are evident in his voice.

I nod miserably.

Celery rushes to take me in his arms.

"Baby no, that's not what happened at all! I just... I can't believe how stupid I am! My Spring Break just started today -- I never thought to check if yours was the same week -- I just assumed! God baby you have to believe me -- I could never forget about you," everything about his voice and his eyes begs me to believe him.

And I do.

I'm weak, but I let myself be held. With Celery's strong arms around me, I start to feel my world falling back into place, and I cling to him tighter. The minutes fly by as I soak up everything about this moment. Celery seems to be drawing strength and peace from it as well.

I'm vaguely aware of Colin trying to sneak away while fading into the background, and feel myself starting to be drawn back into reality. I mean, I have to at least say goodbye.

"Hey man, sorry I like forgot about you there," He shrugs.

"Don't even worry about it. I'm going to head out though -- you kids have fun,"

"We will," I have to pause to gently elbow Celery away to stop him kissing my neck, "We definitely will."

He grins, silently laughing at my flushed face and um, tightening pants.

"Rock on, rock on," he starts our customary good-bye.

"Peace Out. Avril," I finish with a laugh, forgoing the free-style complicated handshake. He nods and leaves the room to let himself out.

I'm disappointed when Celery doesn't go back to kissing me and discover what he's doing instead is giving me an extremely odd look.

"What?"

He raises his eyebrows. "Rock on, rock on, peace out, Avril?"

I smile and do the eye roll thing. "Don't worry about it. It's not important," I give a come hither smile my best shot. Celery has to laugh.

"Okay," He reaches for my hand, and leads me gently towards the stairs.

Laugh if you want, but I'm literally shaking with anticipation.

Celery and I sleep late. Lucky it's a Saturday. I'm still not fully awake when Kyle bursts in, probably to yell at me to get my ass out of bed, but he never gets that far.

"Sweet mother of God!" He gasps in total shock.

Celery laughs while I scramble to make sure as much of our naked bodies as possible gets covered.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Kyle demands, recovering from some of his shock.

"That's what everyone seems to want to know."

"Never mind," I say quickly.

"Never mind? Everything that happened the past two weeks, and now suddenly he's lying naked in your bed and it's never mind?"

I nod. "Yeah."

Kyle shrugs, grinning.

"Okay then -- never mind it is. I can work with that." He says easily.

We share a moment all grinning stupidly at each other before he commands,

"Bros, get dressed so you can come downstairs." His grin gets even more gleeful. "This is so sweet," He laughs, happiness over flow. "And hurry, everyone else is up already. If mom finds your shoes Cel, she's going to freak out. She'll probably run up here and ignore shut doors and no doubt even half naked people in the hug fest that will ensue,"

Knowing he's right, we shoo Kyle out and haphazardly throw on clothes. The clothes thing doesn't work too great, because we keep getting distracted by the others increasingly less naked body and our desire to kiss each other anywhere and everywhere.

We manage eventually. Fully clothed at last, we head downstairs. When we enter the fully packed kitchen, everybody goes nuts. Totally. It's hilarious. The twins simultaneously drop their spoons, dad spits out his coffee, mom gasps, and Kara starts to cry. Happy crying all the way. Next mom is engulfing Celery in a hug, the twins are grinning and Kara bursting to get in on the hug action herself. I watch it all happily from the sidelines.

Kyle is off by the phone, laughing, and trying to convince Jonas he's not lying and that Celery really is here.

"The one time I leave you do make the flight arrangements yourself," My mom says, shaking her head, but smiling in a loving, motherly sort of way.

Celery plays his part as sheepish, bashful son.

"I know. I'm still getting over the stupidity. And to think both of us thought the other one had forgotten, did Carrots totally freak?"

"I was less than pleasant to be around," I summarize quickly before mom can give a more detailed answer.

He smiles at me, so warmly I feel like I can just sit there and bask in it all day.

"How'd you get here?" Jon asks.

"I took a cab," Celery says offhandedly. It hits me finally how awful that must have been for him. Getting to the airport and seeing no one waiting for him. Having to call a cab and manage everything all on his own.

My eyes start to sting, but he quickly puts his arms around me, whispering

into my ear,

"It wasn't that bad baby. And even if that's sort of a lie, I don't care. It was just a misunderstanding. I'd go through it again and worse no problem, so long as I got to end up here with you today," I cling to him tighter.

"I'm still really sorry, I shouldn't have not called you all week like that. I was so hurt, and my idiot pride sorta decided you were supposed to be the one. But why didn't you ever call, I mean, you didn't think I'd forgotten about Spring Break already back then,"

"Well, it's just, I mean, I did call you. I left that message, and I called again that Sunday night or whatever, but you weren't home, no one was. And you never called me back, so I don't know, I guess just thought you were busy. Like, you've been busy a lot lately," stab of guilt time.

"Yeah, I know, I'm sorry for that too,"

He shakes his head.

"Don't be. It's what I said I wanted, what we need. It's just taking some getting used to," I understand what he means. I called him once, and he didn't answer, later when we finally hooked up he explained he'd been out with Saul, and though completely irrationally, I felt kind of weird and bad when that happened.

"Picking up right where you left off I see," Kyle says suddenly from somewhere behind me. I release Celery, spinning around to look him in the eye.

"Huh?"

He shrugs. "Just marveling at your continued ability to completely forget about everyone else in the same room with you but each other," We blush a little, sort of finally realizing everyone's still there, that they've watched the whole display, and that they're all smirking at us.

"Not a word from anyone of you," I say darkly, fighting off the blush, and taking an especially long pause to glare at the twins.

Celery chuckles.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'd just sort of forgotten the way only your right ear gets red when you blush,"

"It does not!" I protest while automatically reaching to cover my ear.

Celery laughs more, and the rest of that lousy bunch known as my excuse for a family joins in.

"Holy shit he wasn't lying," This broken moment brought to you by Jonas Wheaten.

"Record time Jonas," Kyle says approvingly, "Now I know what to say when I want to get you over here fast,"

"When have you ever had trouble getting me to come quickly?" Jonas scoffs, shaking his head.

There's a pause while that statement hangs in the air and it's like everything turns into slow motion. There's the widening eyes of shock as Jonas realizes what he's said, the look of supreme and absolutely hilarious horror that immediately follows that. I'm right there with the twins, gaping at Jonas, Celery is trying not to laugh, Kyle IS laughing, and my parents are like, pretending they don't understand what we all find so funny and horrifying.

"Oh god, oh god," Jonas is mouthing, "I SO didn't mean it like that!" He rushes in a faint voice, all the colour drained from his face. "I'm sorry mom," he says guiltily.

"Sorry? What could you be sorry for? I have no idea what you mean," She says, twiddling her thumbs and rolling her eyes skyward.

Jonas looks immensely relieved. He then focuses his attention on Kyle, shooting him the glare of death when another laugh escapes. But this causes the twins to finally release THEIR laughter, it sort of sets off a chain reaction as one by one the rest of us join in. When this happens there's really nothing Jonas can do but sit down mopily onto a chair beside Kara (the only one who still doesn't understand what's going on) and begin a conversation with her like the rest of us aren't even there.

Such good times.

When breakfast's over and Jonas has finally stopped pouting, we talk about what we want to do. It's agreed that much cramming of fun must go down over the weekend, since I still have to go back to school on Monday. That's Jonas and Kyle too of course.

"I don't mind going to school with you guys," Celery says to me and Jonas. "I think it would be kind of fun actually. I'll just like sit in on your classes and everything,"

I roll my eyes. "I'd have better luck trying to get something out of the lessons if I stayed home,"

"Are you saying you don't want me to come?" He asks tauntingly, knowing full well that's not even slightly what I meant.

"No," I say rather unnecessarily. He enjoys a good look of smugness about it, but quickly steers the conversation back on track.

"Today, right guys? Today we...?"

"Today we rest, tomorrow we marry?" Jonas says uncertainly, not sure if he's got the quote right.

"Today we feast, tomorrow we marry," I correct.

"Oh." Jonas says with a shrug.

"Not that I don't love a good pointless detour as much as the next guy, but could we possibly get back to what we're REALLY going to do today?" This is Kyle, trying to be the big boss.

"We could go to the mall and mock people," I suggest, thinking it's always fun when me and Colin do it.

"Malls are lame," Celery states.

"Well yeah, but making fun of people who don't think so is lots of fun,"

He shrugs. "Whatever you want,"

"Guys?"

"I have bad associations," Jonas says, looking uncomfortable.

"Oh right, sorry," I say, meaning it, remembering the last time we all went to a mall together. You remember. That was when Erica came up to us while we were waiting in line for Two Towers? Don't you listen? Wait. Don't answer that.

"So mall's a no. What about old faithful?" Kyle throws out his idea.

"Movie marathon?" Jonas wants to know.

"Good friends, good movies, good snuggling? I'm down with that," Is Celery's vote.

"I didn't hear the first two, but anything with good snuggling in it sounds

good to me," Mine.

"As long as we get something these the super vegetables don't have memorized and won't be quoting one line ahead of the dialogue the entire time," Jonas casts the final vote for the affirmative.

"Do we walk or do we rock?"

"Uh, does rocking involve taking the Le Baron?" I require Kyle's clarification.

"Yeah," He nods.

"It's a nice day, I say we walk,"

"I say we skate,"

"There's still snow!" I exclaim.

"Not on the sidewalks," He says, looking at me like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

The crazy fool. Crazy fool who I love and smile at humoringly.

"Okay, we'll skate, will you guys get annoyed at us?" I ask the non-skaters.

"I don't care,"

"Me neither," Jonas says with his old faithful easy going shrug. The Zen Master returns.

"Alright then let's plough,"

"Let's skate,"

I roll my eyes. "Silly boy,"

We're getting our stuff, about to leave, when I suddenly stop.

"I should call Colin,"

"Who?" Celery asks.

"Colin, you remember. The guy from last night," Recognition crosses his face, quickly followed by a different kind of confusion.

"Why do you need to call him?" That's an interesting question. I mean,

it's not like I have something to tell him or we made plans or anything. It just sort of hit me, that impulse to call, and it never occurred to me to give much thought as to why.

I shrug.

"I just want to say hey, you know, plus the way I sorta kicked him out last night. I should probably apologize for that, even though I'm sure he's not pissed. Anyway, I think I'm going to invite him over, I want you to meet him,"

"How come?"

"He's a really good friend of mine."

"You've never mentioned him," He sounds like he's working hard at keeping his tone off hand.

"Well, like, Colin's someone who's kind of, I don't know," I shrug, smiling. "Let's just say he's better experienced than explained," Celery smiles faintly, nodding.

"Okay. Whatever. If he's your friend, then of course I want to meet him. After all, I have to make sure he's cool enough to be hanging out with you."

For a second a strange emotion comes up, and I almost consider saying, 'it's my decision who is and isn't cool enough to hang out with me' but then it goes away and all I'm left feeling is puzzled by where such a response could have come from.

I just smile.

"Yeah. Sure."

So I go to the phone and dial up, but tragically, there's no answer. I leave a message, telling him to call me back, and we leave. On the way, I explain to Celery about how is Video Update is now The Movie Gallery, and try to get him to laugh at the way the sign makes it look like the Movie part is "Mo greater than sign ie", but for some reason I don't think he found it very funny.

Anyway, we rent some movies, and it's weird, cause for like the first time ever, I've seen stuff he hasn't, and he's seen stuff I haven't, and even though it's like, a pretty trivial thing, it bothers me that we're out of sync like that. It's other stuff too. I keep noticing him giving me all these bewildered side ways glances all over the place. Like when we were in line 'A Moment Like This' started playing, and it immediately summoned

Colin's terrible impression into my head, especially the way he always clutches both his fists up by his heart every time he she sings `some'. I tried to explain it to Celery, but it just made him get more weirded, so I like gave up.

And now, as we're like, watching the movies, the strangeness hasn't gone away. We're not even sitting together like we normally do. I mean, we sort of started out that way, him on the edge of the couch, me half lying on him, but I couldn't get comfortable. It felt really weird. So I sat up. I gave just leaning against him a shot, but even that didn't feel right. When I realized it was because I was so used to sitting alone, or with Colin or someone like that, I almost started to cry. I wanted things to be the same, but they aren't. I had expected everything to just fall back into place, but it hasn't. And I don't know why.

I'm pretty sure Celery's noticed the same thing, and it must be bothering him as much as it is me. Maybe that's what all the weird looks have been about.

We take a break between Jesus' Son and Vanilla Sky, and I want to try and start talking to Celery about it, but then the phone rings.

"It's for you bro," Kyle says, handing me the phone.

Celery shoots me an unreadable look, but I go to the phone, shrugging to myself and wondering what his problem is now.

"Hey,"

"Hey Asparagus," I roll my eyes.

"What do you want?" Amused but trying to hide it.

"Um, excuse me? I believe YOU called ME." Oh that's right. I did.

I laugh.

"Yeah, sort of forgot about that. Sorry,"

He sighs. The world-weary put on.

"So why'd you call?" I laugh, again at my own stupidity.

"To invite you over later. Like, tomorrow maybe? I want you guys to meet,"

"I thought we already did,"

"Properly I mean,"

"Anything for you. When do you want me to show up?"

"Any time after noon,"

"Sounds cool."

"So you'll come?"

"Yeah. I just said I would." He laughs. "Why, are you nervous?" I frown, sneaking a look over my shoulder at Celery.

"Um, no,"

"Well, you're lying, but that's okay. Don't worry about it, it'll be, uh, it'll be fine. I promise not to do anything to make him instantly hate me like Jonas and Kyle,"

"They don't hate you," I protest lamely.

"Carrots, your entire family hates me with a firey passion. But that's okay. I'm not really all that broken up about it. And like I said, I'll behave myself. I mean, I'm sure he's a really great guy. It'll be fun,"

"Of course it will. You'll be there," He chuckles.

"That's right. But now, how about some details. It's status report time. How's everything with Wonder Boy?"

"Who?" I say, laughing.

"Wonder Boy. Big, blonde, white teeth, muscles... you know who I'm talking about," I glance nervously again over at Celery, who's still standing behind me, leaning against a counter, his arms folded across his chest. His face is neutral, but his eyes show flecks of grey.

"Everything's fine," I try to sound cheerful and genuine, all the while confused about why I feel like I'm lying about that. "Great."

"Well good. I know how much you've been missing him, and I'm really glad the whole Spring break thing was just a big misunderstanding,"

"Yeah me too," My relief is heavy.

"Okay. Go keep having fun or whatever. I'll see you tomorrow,"

"Rock on, rock on,"

"Peace out. Avril," He hangs up, and a second later, so do I.

"So he's coming?" Celery asks.

I nod. "Yep, tomorrow afternoon,"

"That should be um, interesting," He says, trying to smile.

"It'll be good. He's a really great guy, and he's helped me a lot the past couple months," Again Celery's clouded expression confuses me, but he puts his arm around me, and smiles slightly.

"Then I can't wait to meet him,"

We go back into the living room, sit down on the couch, and Kyle hits play. I look over at Kyle and Jonas, and hold in a sigh. They're crunched together on one of the arm chairs, Jonas in Kyle's lap, only half aware of us, whispering to each other occasionally, sharing secret smiles and touches. My eyes fall back to Celery, sitting a half-foot away from me on the couch, eyes only pretending to be watching the screen. I don't even really understand why, but it makes me so sad I feel like crying. Like they have something I didn't know I had lost.

He smiles at me, but there's something missing from it.

"Hey Carrots," he says quietly.

"Hey Celery," I say just as softly.

He raises his arm up, making a space for me. Another rush of emotion hits, both joy and sadness this time. I inhale, closing my eyes, trying to fight it off. He's here. I don't understand why I feel so close to falling completely apart.

"I love you Carrots," He whispers.

I nod, still trying to shake off whatever is causing the tightness in my throat and the burning of my eyes. I move closer, and find some peace when he places his arm around my shoulders, but the feeling never totally goes away.

That evening the whole family plays a few games of Beyond Balderdash (it's still a favourite). It's a lot of fun, but there's still this crazy vibe thing going back forth between me and Celery. I don't know what it is, but I know I really don't like it.

By 11:30 Kara's asleep with her head on the table, the twins are yawning

every five seconds, and even dad looks ready to nod off. We finish up the last game, and everyone starts saying good night and slowly making their way up to their respective quarters.

Jonas, Kyle, Celery and I are last to stand from the table, but Jonas is sagging against Kyle, and though not exactly ready to sleep tired, I'm feeling pretty burnt myself, so we decide against any further hanging out.

"Night guys," Jonas mumbles as Kyle begins guiding him up the stairs.

"Ya, night," I call after them.

"Wanna go watch the Dark Corner?" I ask, only half kidding. "I think Vampire High school comes on in a few minutes," He shakes his head.

"No, I think I'm just going to go to bed. You can though,"

"What're you -- crazy? You think I'm going to sit down here alone while you're lying half naked in my bed?" I scoff. "Don't make me laugh," He grins at me for the first time in hours.

I look into his eyes, and they meet mine, shining and free from the grey I've been wishing wasn't there all throughout the day. Relief floods my body.

"Come on baby," I take his outstretched hand, and we follow the footsteps of Jonas and Kyle up the stairs.

With every ascending step, I feel my heart start to lighten. While of course, other parts of me are doing other things. You know. Things of the, not lightening variety.

We reach the door to my room, shutting it behind us. Celery reaches out to me again, eyes blazing with a new and welcomed light. And it's then, as we're moving towards the bed, his hands are on me, and his tongue slowly slipping through my lips, that I finally start to feel as if once again I'm back where I belong.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Fifteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Wed, 07 Jan 2004 18:00:40 -0600

I wake up earning in the morning, so early it's practically still the night, and Celery's awake, propped up on his side. Staring at me.

"Hi,"

"Hi," I don't know what else to say. Nothing else is required.

He starts brushing his fingers along my cheek, moving down to the nape of my neck, eyes gazing intently.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers hoarsely, his fingers now running down along my chest, still locking me up in his gaze.

"Um, thanks," I say, blushing and feeling oddly shy.

"Your body it's so," he breathes in deeply, eyes closed. "It's perfect,"

"Celery, come on. You're the like, Adonis boy. Not me. Eh, muscles," I chuckle. "I should start calling you that," He looks up at me, away from my chest, not an especially big fan of the idea by the looks of things.

"You call me Celery," I roll my eyes, smiling still, but beginning to feel strange, confused. Just when I thought that had finally gone away for good. And I'll tell ya, I wasn't missing it.

"Yeah, but everyone calls you that, it's not even like a nickname anymore," how old is this news?

"Well, that other thing then,"

"That other thing?" I tease, cause I think he's embarrassed to say it.

"Yeah, that other thing," I hope what I'm seeing is an embarrassed smile forming on his lips, but I really can't tell for sure.

"Cel?" I ask. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he says vaguely, sitting up and straightening, pulling his knees close against his chest and clutching onto them.

Just like everyone does when nothing is bothering them.

I don't know about you guys, but I really missed all the sarcasm.

"Cel, seriously," I reach out and put my hand on his bare shoulder.

"I just feel weird, that's all," oh. That explains everything. I'm so less confused now.

Told ya I was bringing sarcasm back.

"Weird how?"

"Just weird," like that's it, and the topic's closed.

"Hey sweet one," I sing softly, trying to turn him around so he'll look at me.

"To me Carrots," he says, turning back to me and tracing his finger along my jaw line, "You're the most beautiful person on the planet. I love everything about how you look, everything, every detail," something about how he's talking is so incredibly sad, and I have no idea what's going on.

Or how to make it better. It might help if I wasn't feeling so confused myself. Both by the way he's acting right now and by the feelings I've been having since he got back. I just want to be close to him. I want whatever strange barrier seems to be blocking me from feeling that to just like, go away. Like I thought it had last night. But I don't know what to say. We can't seem to connect with each other.

"You say that like you're never going to see me again," I joke, bringing back another old favourite.

Come on. Easy one. You can do this! No? Alright, I'll help you out, that's another old favourite after all. The first one that started all this talk is the joking around when I can't handle being serious. You know, my most classic maneuver!

"No," He shakes his head. "It's just,"

"What, you sound like this is new somehow," smiling and still trying desperately trying to keep this light. "I look the same as I always have. What, did you like forget what I looked like or something?" At it again with the lame jokes. Tragically, it only makes Celery disappear deeper into himself, darkening his features and saddening his eyes.

"I almost did."

You tell me. What am I supposed to say to that?

Since you're no help and I'm lost as what to say, I just lean over and kiss

him. After a few seconds he's kissing me back until we're locked together in this sort of hungry desperation that, while not exactly hours of fun, is all consuming.

Following that we sleep, but mine is fitful and short lived. I wake to discover Celery has gone, out of bed anyway, now sitting on the floor, leaving against my shut door. There I'm guessing because of the clear view it gives you of the bed. He's dressed, but looks tired and distraught.

"Cel, are you okay?" Cause I didn't know how to say he clearly isn't.

"I love you Carrots," he says in a very hollow, toneless sort of way I'm lost at trying to understand.

"I know you do," I hope to sound reassuring, starting to rise out of bed and go to him.

"It's okay," he stops me, hand held out. "I'm going to go get breakfast. You take your shower or whatever, yeah? I'll see you in a little while," Still much too baffled by his performance to be capable of much else, I nod and dumbly watch him slip out of the now half open door.

When I get down stairs after my shower, Celery's watching cartoons with Kara and the twins in the living room. A smile begins to form on my lips as I stand in the doorway watching them. They look so happy, especially the kids. Celery is smiling too, probably amused by how easily they're entertained. But that's nothing new. That's just the way Celery is. People are captivated by him.

"Having fun without me," I tease. Celery looks up, and his peaceful smile flickers briefly before it comes back redoubled.

"Too much fun even."

"I'm not too worried,"

"Maybe you should be," He's taunts, getting up.

"Okay, I'm terrified," He comes over and kisses me.

"That makes two of us," I look into his eyes, and for a second I'm actually afraid he was being serious, but he smiles at me and his eyes are a soft blue.

"Hungry?"

He shakes his head. "I already ate,"

I nod. "Okay, I'm going to go eat something," I hesitate, "You wanna come along?"

He grins. "I'd be delighted,"

I'm still confused, not knowing how to explain his dramatic shift in mood, but mostly I'm just glad he seems to be back to normal. That whole thing earlier this morning like, scared me. I don't want to hear that kind of pain in his voice, see it in his eyes. Especially not about me.

"So tell me about this Colin dude, how long've you been hanging out?"

I've got my back turned to him, getting cereal out of the cupboard, while I think about his question.

"He's been around all year I guess, I just never really noticed him. Not in the right way at least. Then after Christmas, when everything was so," I stumble, feeling awkward talking about it.

"Screwed up?" He aids kindly. I turn to face him, and nod.

"Right. I don't know, somehow all that weirdness helped me see him in a really new light, and I realized he was a totally cool guy. We have a lot in common. Or, okay, that's not exactly right," I sit down at the table, and start pouring my milk. "It's like, well, it's sort of like us," He raises his eyebrows.

"Me and you?"

"Yeah. We're pretty different, but we've bonded over these totally weird and abnormal interests. Like mocking pop music and doing crosswords,"

"You do crosswords now?" He seems amused.

"Yeah and I suck at them. Colin's good though. He always says being smart and not having any friends has allowed him to accumulate a vast amount of pointless knowledge,"

Celery smiles. "Just the kind you need to do crosswords,"

"Better believe it."

"So what else,"

"Huh?"

"What else do you do together?"

"I don't know. Sometimes we drive around, listening to the radio, and making up our own words to sing along. Or we'll go to the mall and like, loiter. Mocking the shoppers. But mostly it's just hanging out in his room, listening to music, talking. Most Saturdays we hook up and have a massive crossword marathon. His dad gets like five different papers, and we try to do them all."

"Sounds like a good time," Celery's voice has a strange hitch in it. He's smiling, and definitely does seem happy for me, and like he means what he's saying, but there's something else going on as well. Some kind of far off sadness or pain he doesn't know how to express.

I reach over and take his hand.

"We have fun, but you'll meet him soon and then you'll hear all about that stuff. Right now I'm with you, and that's the best thing I could ever think of. So tell me about you, I know we talk and e-mail, but I still feel like I've missed so much. What about provincials, still bummed about losing?"

He does a half shrug. "Not really. It sucked to lose, but I don't know, I felt like we gave it our best shot. If we'd like slacked off, or the reffing had been unfair, then I'd be more upset. But it's really no big deal,"

I kiss his cheek. "I wish I could have been there,"

"What, to see me lose?"

I roll my eyes. "No, to like, comfort you. Or just to have been with you,"

His face softens, and joy rushes into me as I see a peaceful look enter his eyes.

"I missed you being there," I kiss him again, on his lips this time.

"I love you Celery, I really do. And I'm glad you're here," He smiles, and I finally get started on my (now very soggy) cereal.

Jonas and Kyle stumble into the kitchen just as I'm drinking the last dregs of milk from my bowl (which, according to my mom, is a disgusting habit I got from my dad).

"Hey guys," Jonas mumbles. Still with one foot in sleep land.

"What's up for today?" Kyle is only marginally more alert.

"Well, Colin's coming over later,"

They look at each other, and grimace.

"What, don't you guys like him?" Celery inquires, picking up on it right away.

"We uh, don't um, actively dislike him," Jonas fumbles.

"Yeah, it's just sort of, you know, not a love. He's uh..." Kyle looks to Jonas again, this time for a bail.

"An acquired taste,"

"Reminds me of someone else I know," Celery says, sideways glance at me. My mind travels back to the party and the barn and the whole conversation about Kaleb and why he liked me.

"Yeah, but less cool."

He smiles. "That goes without saying,"

"When's he coming?"

"Noonish,"

"By then we should probably be outta here," Jonas says, mostly to Kyle. Who nods. This gets Celery all curious again.

"You really dislike him that much?"

"No," Kyle denies quickly, but not altogether convincingly.

"We'd just rather be you know, some where that's else," A sort of Oz line isn't going to be enough for me to not get pissed at Jonas for freaking Celery out, and I glare at him to let him know it.

"Anyway, it'll give you guys a better chance to get to know each other," Here's my brother, doing his Kyle best to diffuse the situation, and take the heat off his honey. It's kind of cute when you think about it.

No. I'm staying mad. I just got him in a good mood again. Damn them.

"Right," Celery says, definite shades of freakage. And again I say damn them.

"You'll get along great, there's like, no doubt in my mind."

Jonas and Kyle share another look.

Apparently, there's plenty in theirs.

Things get off to a bit of a rough start when Colin arrives. Here's my definition of a rough start: Colin walks in, and says, "So, you're Celery," and then does the 'here's me, being totally unimpressed' look. Celery responds to this by glaring at him and putting an arm around my shoulders.

Let's all say it together: POSSESIVE!

This only makes Colin sour further.

So yeah. Not the best way to start.

"So like, name introductions, clearly not an issue, but hey, you guys still have lots of getting to know each other action to get done, so let's like, go do some of that, in the living room?" Colin smiles a bit, like he's letting me know my trying too hard is totally obvious, and I smile weakly in return.

Celery pulls me closer.

We get to the living room eventually. Celery and I take the couch, and Colin one of the armchairs.

It's a study in awkward silences.

Then suddenly, Colin says,

"So Celery, I've heard tons about you, why don't we find out if any of it is true?"

I do an inner fist in the air of exultation as a small smile creeps onto Celery's lips.

"Sounds good,"

So they go back and forth for awhile, actually doing the getting to know each other thing. Awhile lasts about 15 minutes. Then they start talking about me.

I think I preferred awkward silence.

After not too long, talking about me starts not working for them either. At first it was all in like, good fun, you know, the sharing embarrass

Carrots stories with each other, but somewhere along the line that shifted, and now it's lost the friendly edge. It's like they're competing with each other or something. `I know more weird shit about Carrots than you do' and `there was this one time we laughed so hard I started choking' and stuff like that.

I want to cut in somehow, and divert the conversation, but they're both getting pretty animated. And I'm like, way over on the sidelines.

My pathetic attempt is to clear my throat really obviously. Waha! Success! That's two sheepish smiles directed at me! Yes! I'm the champion!

"Guess we got a little carried away," I smile at him, Colin.

"Just a little,"

Celery kisses me, softly, like an apology. I start to beam without even really noticing it.

Colin's like, "Whoa,"

I laugh. "Sorry, I forgot you've never seen me do that before,"

He shrugs, grinning. "It's cool. I've never really seen you look that happy either, so I can deal with gay kisses if the fringe benefits include a happy Carrots,"

"Thanks man," We share a little smiling stare action.

Celery just takes my hand in his. Like he thought I forgot about him and is reminding me of his presence. I raise my eye brows at him. Not exactly a reminder I needed big guy. He smiles a bit.

"So Asparagus, you going to take off some school for quality timeage with Celery?"

I shrug. "I don't really think so you said you wouldn't mind doing the school thing again right?"

Looking to Celery for conformation. He nods.

"Yeah, it'll be fun to see everyone again. And better than real school, because I won't have to do any work and we'll be in all the same classes," This makes me smile happily. Very nice to be basking in his affection. I'll certainly take it over the other stuff that's been coming my way since he got here.

"Dude, are you going to warn him about Crazy Ms. Sarte?" Colin asks with an evil grin. I roll my eyes at him, snickering.

"Man, remember the poetry readings at the beginning of class?" He laughs.

"To `set the mood'!" More mutual laughter.

Really. If you had been there, you'd think it was hilarious. Like, picture this crazy old women, in like, elf boots, making really big air quotation marks as she said that, and like bobbing up and down. You can't not think that's funny when you see it happen on a daily basis for the first month of your class.

"Who's crazy Ms. Sarte?"

"She's this new drama teacher we got this year, and she's like, entirely off her rocker." I answer once I've stopped chuckling.

"I don't even think she has one," Colin adds, and we crack up again.

"But we do know she has cats,"

"Oh god," Colin is laughing and waving his hands around. "Remember Kaleb? Her cat ate my homework!" I'm practically convulsing now. I swear you'd think this was funny if you knew her. Or like, had a sense of humour. (See! THAT was a joke. I've just proven my own point.)

Celery looks at us, laughing and gasping for breath, and he furrows his brow.

"Kind of a had to be there thing?" Whoa. Bad. Very bad. A had to be there thing, and he wasn't there. I mean, he's always been there. This is very, very bad.

I squeeze his hand and give that old love projected through the eyes thing my best shot. After a few seconds he smiles faintly, and squeezes back.

"This moment brought to you buy?" Colin questions. I shrug.

"Something. Don't worry about it."

He nods. "Kay. Awkward silence anyone?"

I grin. "Tact is just, not one of your best skills is it?"

He smiles. "It comes from not caring about what people think of me. Kind of leads to the painful honesty thing."

"The bothersome bluntness,"

"The aggravating abruptness,"

"The tiresome tactless ness,"

"The dire directness,"

"I'm all out." Colin gives up.

"Me too,"

Celery squeezes my hand.

That's just sort of how it keeps on going. Colin is animated, almost aggressively so, and Celery is mostly silent, communicating with body language and touch instead of speech. Not that I'm exactly complaining over here, it's just, I don't really think it's a happy thing for him. And he hasn't been sending Colin the love either. Glares when he thinks I'm not looking would be an accurate description of his behavior. So he glares, and he keeps me close, while Colin keeps engaging me in conversation, which is good for some laughs and distraction, but seems to be only adding to Celery's withdrawal.

I sigh, beginning to realize that in their different and socially inept ways, they're both fighting for my attention. The dynamic of this group isn't working at all. Obviously, Celery has first place. His claim over me is absolute. He gets to hold my hand if he wants too. If he starts talking, I'm always gonna listen. But Colin's my boy too. Just in a majorly different way. And he's gotten me through some pretty tough shit. I can't just ignore him.

Not that he's about to let me. Colin doesn't appear to be a fan of the whole second fiddle idea. And he's just showing both of us that by the way he's acting. I guess it sort of makes sense for Celery to feel threatened like he is, but he should know, you know? I think I've made it abundantly clear I'll never be interested in anyone else but him. But like, I'm allowed to have friends right?

It's been pretty much steadily growing since he got here, and now, a couple hours since into it, the tension's definitely knife cutting capacity. I'm both grateful and in a way saddened when Colin gets up, and announces he really has to be getting going.

"Okay man, we'll see you at school tomorrow though right?"

He nods.

"Wouldn't miss it," He assures me.

Celery makes an `oh joy' face.

"I'm looking forward to it already," Ah it's my old friend sarcasm.

Colin smirks at me.

"I'll see ya,"

"Yeah," I say absently, a little distracted by the `I can't believe you said that!' look I'm glaring Celery's way. He seems about to start humming, he's laying the innocent look on so thick.

I sigh. I don't even know what to say. Colin looks a bit sorry, cause he knows the way Celery's acting is because of him, even though it's like, not his fault.

He just sort of nods at me, and is just opening the door, when I decide I don't want him to leave this way. So I call him back, saying,

"Hey Colin, if you see Jordan," He grins, cause he knows that's my way of letting him know I'm not mad at him or anything.

"I'll be sure to tell him you hate him." I nod.

"See that you do," and then with all the rocking on and peacing out and Avril.

Turn back to Celery to see him giving me yet another confused look.

"Who's Jordan?" I hold in a sigh and smile instead.

"There is no Jordan. It's from this weird song, called If You C Jordan. Me and Colin are always sending each other cheesy e-cards and beatgreetz and stuff, and this one time he sent me the if you see Jordan one. Apparently it's the musical equivalent of saying I hate you."

He raises his eyebrows briefly like he's going to comment further, but then seems to let go of that thought.

"Okay then." This sad heaviness in his voice.

I walk up to him and put my arms around his neck, hoping it'll take his mind off whatever's making him look like that and just smile again.

"And the whole Avril thing? That's Avril Lavigne?"

I let out the sigh I held in earlier, dropping my arms from his neck.
"Yeah,"

"I fucking hate Avril Lavigne," He mutters.

"But don't you think she's so bad she's good?" What I expect to hear back is the line, 'no she's so bad she's gone past good and back to bad again' with is a thing from the movie Ghost World, sort of.

But instead he says,

"No. I think she's a talentless poser who needs someone to tell her real skaters don't wear baggy clothes." I'm surprised for a second, but then I remember that it was Colin I watched Ghost World with, not Celery.

"Oh, well you don't have to like her, or you know, enjoy disliking her. Not just because I do," He has a heavy sigh of his own.

"Sure,"

"Celery, are you really bothered by this?" He stares at me for a long minute, but then smiles.

"No. It's fine. I'm with you. Everything's perfect." I let myself feel relieved, and ignore the voice inside me that's telling me he's lying.

"I love you," He closes the gap and kisses me.

"I love you too,"

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Sixteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
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It's a new day, and this time it's me staring at him while he sleeps. I don't know what was going on in Celery's mind when he was watching me, and I'm having trouble sorting out just what exactly is going through mine now, but I'll give a shot at explaining it if you like. Maybe we can muddle through this one together.

I know, just looking at him, he's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I know this. I know I don't think there could ever be a more perfect shade of blonde than that of his hair, a more perfectly shaped pair of lips, a lovelier set of cheek bones, eyes with more surprisingly long and thick lashes. I know he has eyes with the power to change my mood in an instant, and a voice I long to hear at all moments. One that sends shivers down my spine every time he says my name. I know when he smiles, I feel like there's nothing else I could ever need on this earth and that when he laughs and it's because of me, I feel like a god.

It's his laughter that means the most, his laughter and smiles, his actions and expressions. This is true, because it is Celery who I love - not his cheek bones (lovely though they are) or his hair, or even his lips. I love the boy I knew when we were six, the awkward preteen I first realized meant more to me than anything else, and the very nearly man he is today.

I love this new person he seems to have changed into without my knowledge, but he confuses me as well. I love him because he is Celery, and I will always love Celery, no matter what he is or how he's changed. I just need to get to know this new and different person lying beside me, I need to learn his patterns and thoughts so we can be comfortable together again. Comfortable and in sync and happy. I see it as a matter of getting him to be happy, because once Celery is happy, I can easily follow. I can be happy, just knowing he is. This is nothing new. It's familiar even, which is comforting on its own.

This new and different Celery who snowboards, hates Avril Lavigne and seems to have the heaviest heart of all the Celery's I've known, he is not a person to whom I'll have trouble giving my love. To stop loving Celery would be impossible at this point, and the desire certainly isn't there, so the thought barely has point to occur. It's different now, for reasons I mostly haven't begun to fathom, but I trust in us. US - Celery and I - it's all I know. In some form or another, it's all I've ever known, and will ever know. I am his. Also very important to remember, he is mine. This new Celery is mine as well, just as I - different to him though I may very well seem - am as ever, Celery's.

So now as his eyes open, slowly and with some reluctance, I find myself smiling. I love this person beside me, I just need to get to know him a little better. And that's alright. That can even be a good thing. Exciting and new without being completely terrifying.

The smile on my face seems to be coming as a bit of a surprise to Celery, but I'm not about to suppress a totally genuine expression. Certainly not this one, one that is coming out of good things and hope.

"I love you Celery," I tell him simply, calmly. Because I do, and I always will and this moment felt like the perfect time to remind him of that.

The smile on his own lips comes as an even greater surprise to Celery, but I think it pleases him, cause he lets it stretch out until it's softened his whole face with happiness.

"I love you too Carrots. I'm glad you're here," this puzzles me, briefly, but then I understand.

Here is where I've been the whole time, physically at least. But maybe (or even probably) my mind and heart have been elsewhere. Or they appeared that way at least. To Celery.

"I'm sorry if it seemed like I wasn't, before," He shakes his head gently, reaching over to me, and running his fingers through my hair.

"That wasn't your fault. I let myself see stuff that wasn't there - and miss other stuff that was. I'm the one who should be sorry and Carrots, I promise I am." I kiss him, and it's natural, and right, and not laden with anything.

"You'll always be the most important thing in my life. That hasn't changed Celery - and it NEVER will," Something disturbingly like doubt crosses his face for the briefest of instants, but then it's gone, and because I want so badly for it not to have been, it's not too hard to pretend like it was never there.

"I know," He takes my hand from where it was lying on his shoulder, and kisses it reverently.

"I know."

Breakfast, unfortunately, does not go as well as waking up did. It starts out alright, but then Kyle asks in passing how everything went with Colin, and Celery shuts down in a heartbeat. And closed off and distant is how he remains for the remainder of breakfast, and all the way through to right now, when we're walking to school, him, me and Jonas.

He talks to Jonas a little, short phrases and half smiles, but he barely looks at me. I feel I should probably be sorry about this, and I should be wanting to make it better some how, but to be honest, I'm a little too busy being angry. Very angry, in fact. I don't even know where to start actually. With the angry.

For one thing, the way he's acting now, well, it's like this morning never happened. Except that it did, and I really thought it meant something. It sure felt like it did while it was happening. The words we said, the emotions behind them that was real. But now he's ruining all that again. Making it sound false and empty. Which hurts a lot. But it's definitely an anger thing as well. Anger for the situation itself, and anger for the pain as result of the situation.

Angry also because he seems to think this is somehow okay. To act like this because of Colin. Who is my FRIEND. But because Celery wants some excuse to be in a bad mood, or to sulk and brood so I'll give him all this attention and try to comfort him, and Colin's the only convenient one around, he gets to be the bad guy? Is that what this is about? Cause I really don't know if I can stomach this if it is. He can't not know Colin's just a friend. In fact, how dare he think anything else. How can he imply that it could be anything else. After all this time, should I really be expected to reassure him of my feelings? Reminding him I love him is not something I have a problem with - in fact I look at it as more of a joy - but this, this is different. This is proving to him I won't and am not doing something I never would in a million years. Something he KNOWS I would never do in a million, billion years.

I finally consider this all very unfair to Colin himself. Okay, so he wasn't exactly the nicest version of himself yesterday, and he didn't exactly go out of his way to win Celery over but the point is he shouldn't have HAD to. The fact is, Celery has no plausible reason to dislike Colin so much or so openly, and all he's doing is messing everything up. Making people uncomfortable and angry. Namely me.

Maybe I'm being awful and selfish and really self-centered about all of this, but damnit - so is he. And for once, I'm not going to pour all my resources into making him feel better. For once, I'm worrying about ME first, and I'm dealing with MY side of what's going on and that's all there is to it. If this is how he's going to be, then fine. I can be an idiot too. As I'm sure you can attest to.

At school, which is where we are right now, everyone is delighted to see Celery. A bizarrely large number of people keep coming out of nowhere to give him hugs, slaps on the back, and other gestures of greeting and welcome. And I'd probably be really happy for him if I wasn't currently stewing in my own bitter juices, with my arms crossed and a completely childish pout frown type thing in charge of my face.

"You're cheerful this morning," Comes Colin's voice from behind my right ear. I spin around, and find myself extremely happy to see him.

"I'm alright - just you know," I nod over at Celery, who is currently ending a three-way hug with two people I swear I've never seen before in my entire life, and laughing with them like they're his best friends in the whole world.

Colin rolls his eyes deprecatingly.

"Wonder boy," that pretty much sums it up, yeah.

"Everything's weird,"

Colin puts his arm around me, an action I find wildly ironic at this moment. "People change,"

I snap my head to look at him so fast I almost get dizzy.

"Not us!"

He smiles sadly, tilting his head slightly to the side. "I'm not saying your feelings for him have to change, or they don't have to go away, anyway. But you're different now, so is he. That's what happens. You're both growing up, and it just so happens that lately, the growing up you've been doing has been happening in two really different situations and places. So you HAVE changed - both of you. That doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing,"

I sigh, "I don't like change,"

"I know you don't,"

I sigh again, even more poutishly.

"I was okay with this. This morning, when I first woke up, I had a good talk with myself. I had everything figured out. I realized it wasn't so bad that we'd both changed some, cause getting to know the new Celery could be a really interesting, good thing. I was down with it. And when he woke up, we had a really good moment. Then breakfast happened and everything got all shitty again."

Throughout my little quiet temper tantrum, Celery didn't even look my way. Too busy with yet another group of adoring 'friends'. Jonas is with him, but he looks as swept up in everything as the rest of them do. I tear my eyes away from that and go back to looking into Colin's. I see concern there.

"I'm alright," I say with a shrug.

"No you're not," He looks over at Celery, but I don't follow his gaze.
"And neither is he." Then I have to look.

Celery's mouth is still moving, and whatever conversation he's having with the group is continuing, but his eyes are fixed on me. And what I see there chills my heart. The pain in his face is so clear, and it's like his heart is crying out to me through his grey eyes. My anger is instantly erased and all I want to do is to go to him, but there's so much in the way. There's Colin beside me, the about 15 feet between us, and the seven or eight people crowded around him, vying for his attention.

I want to see him take a few steps, or even one, just some small indication he's trying to break away from the crowd to get to me - that's all I need to be able to start moving myself, but it doesn't happen. Instead our eyes hold for another second, and then mine drop from his gaze - or maybe his did. Either way, whatever tenuous connection we formed has been broken, and he's back talking to the crowd, and I'm back standing alone. Colin is with me, but I'm very much alone.

In class, things continue to go badly. Badly like everyone shooting me disapproving glances, then shifting to ones of thinly veiled pity when looking in Celery's direction. Badly like Colin and Celery having another face off glare match about who was going to sit beside me in my first class. In the end, Celery won, only because I managed to get a pleading glance over Colin's way while Celery's was momentarily distracted.

Badly like right now, Celery sitting beside me, holding my hand (my mind screaming - how can anything be bad while that is happening) and Colin in the desk behind me.

Humming "Every breathe you take". In a bad way.

I want to turn around and glare at him, and frankly, I can't think of any reason why I shouldn't. So that's exactly what I do. He stops humming, and smiles at me innocently, twiddling his thumbs. I feel amusement battling annoyance, and eventually I decide to call it a draw so I can go back to facing the front and not listening to the lesson.

After about thirty seconds, Colin starts up again.

I dare to take a peak at Celery, and he meets my look head on. I smile tentatively, and he squeezes my hand.

"Love you," I mouth.

He nods.

"Me too," but then he looks away, and I feel the wall between us coming right back up.

Miserably, I slide a little lower in my chair. Colin is no longer humming, but at this point, that's small comfort.

Lunch is a whole new definition of bad. The cafeteria, and all I want to do is sit at a table alone with Celery and maybe Jonas - and just eat my lunch in peace. Maybe spend a little time with my fucking husband, and try to work this shit out a little.

But of course that doesn't happen. Because this is me we're talking about.

What I wanted was a peaceful, quiet lunch, what I get is something like twenty people packed at our one little table that could never reasonably be expected to house more than six, and even that's pushing it. The only good thing about the whole hour is the occasional, brief, apologetic looks Celery offers in my direction. Sometimes in all the noise and confusion, I swear he's smiling the smile that's only for me, and I almost feel okay again. But then the crowd starts up again, and his eyes are yanked away from mine, and I feel lost and alone all over again.

With those feelings, again comes anger. Anger cause the apologetic looks aren't enough. Anger because there's a voice inside me that's getting pretty damn vocal, which keeps pointing out that if he really wanted to, Celery could just get up from the table, take my hand, and we could walk away from all this. We could go somewhere and be alone. Really be TOGETHER, like we're supposed to be.

I suppose it's true that I could do the same thing. I could get up, only right now, I'm a little afraid he wouldn't follow. Right now he's so busy with everyone else, I'm not even entirely sure he'd notice.

Which is pretty much where I lose it. Not notice?! Well fuck that.

So I get up, and rather angrily at that. Then I storm away from the table. And I get all the way out of the cafeteria, before I suddenly realize I'm having trouble breathing.

Because he didn't follow me.

He didn't follow me.

I can't bring myself to look back, but naturally my mind in having a little field day, images of Celery, still sitting at the table, talking and laughing. Like maybe he really didn't even notice. Or worse, simply

doesn't care.

I make it to the bathroom before I start really hyperventilating. Before I start sobbing so hard I'm doubled over. Before Colin finds me, and holds me while I cry.

"What happened?" He whispers eventually.

I just shake my head.

"Nothing,"

"That was going to be my first guess," He jokes softly, wiping the tears from my cheeks.

"I'm pretty sure it's stupid," I respond in a choked voice.

"Possible. Still something more than nothing got you crying like that,"

"I... he," I shake away the returning urge to cry a little more. "Lunch, with everyone, it all got to be too much and I," my voice hitches, "I left." I close my eyes, shutting the opening for the tears. "He didn't come after me."

"Ah," Colin's voice is barely audible, but his arms tighten around me.

"Do you think it's stupid?" I find myself asking.

"Hell yes," He says fiercely.

I pull away a little, startled.

He smiles wearily.

"Him Asparagus - not you. He's an idiot if he didn't follow you." It's a shock, but I'm able to return the smile, if only slightly.

"Thanks man,"

He shrugs.

"The truth is something I require no thanks for offering." I roll my eyes a bit at this, feeling like I'm returning to myself again.

"And here I was, thinking you only told the truth when it was going to end up pissing a lot of people off,"

He grins. "That's good too."

I give him a final thank-you squeeze, and then let Colin go. We help each other up, and I finish wiping my face. I peer at myself in the dirty mirror for awhile, poking at my blotchy tear stained face.

"I look like shit,"

He nods. "That you do."

"More of that honestly thing you're so fond of right?"

"That's right,"

I sigh.

"You ready to go back out there?" He asks, very gently.

"I guess. Not the cafeteria, but I guess I could be up for a little hallway roamage,"

"With you every step of the way man," He assures me. I take great comfort in this.

"Okay then, let's go."

So we walk. We roam the halls.

And after about five minutes, Celery almost runs us over. I stare at him, and he stares at me.

"I was looking for you," He blurts, slightly winded.

I remain impassive.

"Were you."

"Yeah, when you left - I didn't know what was going on. I came after you but, I don't know, you were out of sight." Which means he followed me out, but only after about five minutes (the time it took for me to calm down enough to even make it to the bathroom from my place slumped against the cafeteria doors).

"I went to the bathroom,"

Celery hand is suddenly on my face, and he's stroking my cheek tenderly. It's still damp.

"That's it?"

"No," I answer honestly.

Celery's gaze shifts over to Colin, and I feel a surge of anger.

"It's got nothing to do with him!"

He looks back at me. He doesn't say anything.

I take a step away from him, fully angry again.

"Care--"

"Don't." I shake my head. "We can talk about this later. Class is starting in a couple minutes anyway," He nods mutely, but inches closer.

I sigh. "What?"

He looks at me sorrowfully.

"I'm sorry," He whispers.

"Okay," I say heavily, and let him put his arm around me.

In the near background, I can practically hear Colin rolling his eyes.

The afternoon is... well, mostly silent. It's an up and down period at best. Celery stays close to me at all times, and he keeps up the physical contact, but that's pretty much it. No talking, no meeting my eyes. Really no indication at all that he's going to be ready to talk about anything, or in any other way acknowledge what's going on between us.

When the day is finally over, Colin has the tact to simply nod and leave our farewells at that. I recognize fully it's something he's doing out of respect for me, and the gesture is totally appreciated.

Walking home with Celery and Jonas is a bit tense, but at least we're finally pretty much alone. You know. Minus the horde.

After school and alone time doesn't really go to great either. We try to gather at the kitchen table and do our homework as usual, but Celery doesn't have any, so he ends up spending the time staring at me quite mournfully, which is rather distracting. I eventually have to give it up with apologies to the understanding but admittedly bewildered Jonas, and head for my room. Celery follows me in a way I hate and am forced to describe as meekly.

Having him trail after me like a kicked puppy all the way up the stairs to

my room gets to be a little much and as soon as we get inside I slam him up against the recently shut door (which okay, I could only do cause he let me) and demand,

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He lets me keep him pinned there while avoiding my eyes.

"Celery?" I press, my tone, if anything, hardening.

"I haven't quite gotten that one figured out yet." He admits, doing, if nothing else, a damn good impression of honestly.

I drop my hands from his shoulders and back off, but he chooses to remain pressed up against the door.

"It's Colin, isn't it?" I ask in a kind of tired, morbidly curious way.

"Or so it would appear." He mutters.

"Which means WHAT Celery?" Starting to get frustrated again.

He sighs, "Which means, it's not that simple. I wish it was, because then there'd be a simple solution as well. But Colin's not the problem."

"So what is then?" I follow his eyes wherever they go, refusing to drop contact.

"Me." He answers mutely.

This knocks a considerable amount of the indignation out of my sails. I walk over to the bed and half collapse into it. He waits several seconds before slowly joining me. I hold out my hand and he takes it.

"I'm tired of this." I murmur, looking away from him.

"I know. Me too." I think for maybe the first time since he got back, we're actually understanding each other.

"It seems like all we do these days is fight and make up, do stupid stuff and then retract it... it's not how I want us to be." I clarify the points he already knows.

"I seem to dimly recall it's exactly how we once promised each other we never would be."

I have to look at him then, startled by the memory of us, one or two days into our courtship, sitting at the kitchen table, mocking That 70's Show

and vowing to never be one of those lame couples that are forever having stupid fights and then having cheesy reconciliations.

Can I get away with saying that feels like a lifetime ago without sounding like a total prat? Cause it does.

"Oh god. We've become everything we hate." I wail, a small laugh in my voice.

The smile on his lips is so beautiful in all its tenderness and uncertainty it's hard for me to believe things are so wrong with us. Except that they are. But at least now we're talking about it. Sort of.

"Cel? How is it you? What did you mean?"

"I haven't changed. I thought I had, I thought I was over being so possessive and controlling, but I see that I'm not. It was easy enough to fool myself when I didn't have to see you with other people, but as soon as I got here, amidst the strangeness of my arrival, during what I wanted to be a private moment between us, there was Colin. And it seems like I haven't been able to get away from him since. He just pops up everywhere? Either in person or in your conversations. Except, there's no reason that should be a bad thing. You obviously care about each other, you said yourself how much he's helped you the past couple months. I should love him just for that, instead I kind of hate him. Which is NOT his fault, and that's why he's not the problem. It's me and my idiot reactions. But I can't seem to stop seeing what's not there and over and miss reacting to what is."

"And this is why you've been brooding the entire time you've been here?"

"You noticed that huh?"

"I notice everything." I say bluntly.

He nods. "I know. Hasn't stopped me from acting like the Original Asshole."

"It really hasn't." I'm forced to agree.

"So to make use of a horribly over used phrase where do we go from here?"

I struggle to find an answer, but do not.

"I don't know."

"Well at least we're finally on the same page."

"Good silver lining there Celery." I mock gently, curling up against his just a little.

He looks down at me, a sad half smile on his lips.

"I think maybe I need... I don't know. I don't know how to stop feeling like this."

"Stay." As the thought suddenly occurs.

"Stay?"

"Yeah, just don't go back. Stay here, stay with me. Get used to stuff. Become apart of my life again, I mean, an actively participating part. Just stay."

"I... I mean, I can't," He stammers.

"Why not?"

He shrugs with his whole body. "Well, I mean, for all the reasons I couldn't stay the first time. Plus I have to finish my school year and then there's my job... Carrots, even if I didn't have those things, I want to get better at not feeling like I have to dominate your whole existence all the time. Staying... it'll just be more of this." He finishes off weakly, as if he's sorry it's true, but still feels like it had to be said.

"You can't get used to something, you can't learn to be okay with something, if you're never in contact with it. Cause then it's all just in theory, and it WILL be more of this. Stay and let us work at it together and things'll get better. I know they will."

"Wow. Blind optimism. It's been awhile."

I glare at him.

"Making fun of me is not getting you rapidly back into my good graces." But I'm mostly teasing. After all, it's like I said to him once way back in the beginning 10 years plus and he's never been out of them. Cause no matter what I'll always be pathetically in love with the guy. Original Asshole or not.

Does he know it?

"Cel,"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

He smiles.

"Yeah. I know you do."

"It's important to me that you understand no matter what you do, all the stupid stuff we both do... I'm always going to "

"Hey, Care, love, I know. Love you too yeah? I'm just... I need to get this fixed."

"It's not just you. It can't be."

He looks at me questioningly. "How are you feeling?"

I run my hands through my hair.

"That's a tough question."

"How the FUCK are you feeling?" He growls it, but then smiles a little.

I roll my eyes.

"Your sense of humor remains focused on making fun of me I see."

"Told you I hadn't changed."

"I suppose you did."

"That's one dodge. You're not getting another. Answer the question."

"I'm feeling," I sigh, "It's hard to say. An hour ago, I was pretty pissed off. Most of the day I'd say pissed off would accurately describe my mood. But I mean, I was also really like, scared. Cause I didn't, and don't really, understand what's been going on with you. You've been so distant, so miserable so much of the time since you've been back. And I was so sure the minute you walked through the door everything would be okay, although, the fact that I expected you to walk through the door a couple weeks ago may have had something to do with the less than picture perfect reunion."

"Yeah, that really got us off on the wrong foot didn't it?" It's pretty much rhetorical.

In the quiet, I hear Kyle's usual noisy arrival downstairs. Celery's eyes suddenly get a little brighter.

"Care, why don't you, like, go out?"

I raise my eye brows.

"I think I speak for all of me when I say huh?"

"Go out. Go hang with Colin or something. Let me just, be here. I won't brood, I'll just chill with Jonas and Kyle for awhile."

"You think this will help?" I ask, slowly turning the idea over in my mind.

"I think it needs to start happening. And I need to start getting okay with it. Like you said."

"Are you going to stay?" Suddenly on the brink of exultation.

"Until the end of Spring Break at least... I, we'll see."

I lean over and kiss him softly.

"Okay you realize that's totally cheating right?"

I smile with blatant evil.

"Fully aware." And with that I get up and bound out of the room.

Kyle does a double take when he sees me throwing on my shoes and starting to leave the house.

"Where are you going?"

"Colin's." I answer simply.

"Without Celery?"

"It was his idea."

Kyle comes closer to me, putting his hands on my shoulders.

"What's going on with you guys?"

"Stuff. Some of it bad, but we're trying to work it out. This is plan A. He wants to talk to you though, you and Jonas, so you can find out more from him okay? But don't just drill him about us stuff alright? Just be his brother."

Kyle smiles.

"I can do that."

"Knew I could count on you." I offer not further farewell, but just turn and let myself out of the house.

When I walk into his bedroom, Colin is only mildly surprised to see me, and from that little bit of surprise he recovers quickly, smiling at me sardonically asking,

"Where's Wonder Boy?"

"You really need to stop calling him that," I say, trying to act like I don't have a stupid smirk on my face.

"That's right, cause it bothers you so much,"

I try unsuccessfully to glare. "Really, cut it out. And no more humming Every Breath You Take when you're in the same room together either,"

He raises his eyebrows. "You mean there's going to be a next time? Sure you want to risk it? We might start pulling each other's hair and using our nails,"

I slump down on the bed beside him with a tired sigh.

"What was up with that anyway? I mean like, oil and water get along better," denial is a beautiful thing, friends. And I know it well.

"Oh come now Carrots, you don't need me to explain it to you." He says more softly and seriously than expected.

"Maybe I do. Why shouldn't you be able to be friends?" He smiles at me wearily, and reaches over to smooth some of my hair away from my face, sending a shiver down my spine.

"You want to listen to some N'sync? Boybands and rappers, too much fun...?" I sigh, realizing that whatever the hell he just did is the only answer I'm going to get.

My head's too full, and I don't have the energy to think about what any of this means, so I nod, settling against his back as he turns his CD player on with the remote and the remix of Girlfriend starts playing.

We talk a little, later, in the early evening, just about Celery and how weird he's been acting, and a little also about how weird I've been feeling, but Colin is strangely silent. I mean, he's always up for letting me have a good ramble, but he doesn't cut in once with any of his own signature brand of wisdom, and I find myself falling silent as well,

uncomfortable with having my voice be the only one filling the silence.

"I've caused you a lot of trouble," He says eventually, shaking his head, at least 10 minutes after I drifted off the most recent time.

"No, it's not your fault. Even Celery doesn't think so."

"Still, I saw what was going on with him. I didn't try to make it better, actually, I feel obligated to admit under the terms of our agreement that I sort of tried to make it worse."

This revelation leaves me temporarily stunned. It takes me awhile to respond.

"Why?" One word at a time people.

"You're such a smart guy Carrots. Sometimes it really baffles me how oblivious you can be." His tone isn't mean, just, genuinely well, baffled.

"You don't...? I mean, you're not?"

"In love with you?" He laughs. "No Carrots, I don't think even you'd have been able to miss that if it were the case. Doesn't mean I don't get jealous."

"Why? We're friends, other people have more than one friend at a time, its one of the perks of the friends set up."

"I think we both know that none of the three of us in this mess are exactly what you'd call `other people'."

It kills me when people are right about stuff I don't want to be true. I'm hating him a little bit right now, cause I know he's right, and it's making me feel like an idiot.

"But I mean, you knew... you knew how it was between us, how important he is to me. I thought you were cool with it."

"Me too."

"So basically, you both resent the others presence in my life, and thus, hate each other by default."

"In a word yeah."

"This kind of sucks for me,"

He grins. "I know. Sorry." I think he means it, even though he doesn't

sound remotely apologetic.

"You guys could like, have a twister grudge match to settle the score."

"How flexible is he?" He wants to know, like I just made a valid suggestion.

"Pretty damn flexible," I say with a wicked smile.

"I'm so sorry I asked." Colin bemoans, covering his shaking head with his hands.

I'm less than sympathetic. I just kick his leg.

"What am I going to do with you?" I ponder.

"Is that rhetorical?"

"Not if you have a good answer."

"Can't say that I do. I mean, from my own selfish point of view, having Celery swoop back into town hasn't exactly been a magical fun tour. However despite all the shit, I see that you love him. And that he loves you. In a kind of a fucked up way, but hey." He shrugs. "Now Carrots, you're the first true friend I've ever had, and if I had to give that up, I'd be very put out to say the least, but I can see when I'm beat. The guy is your soul mate. You're married to him. You've been best friends pretty much your entire lives. I can't compete with that."

"So what are you saying?" I want him to tell me I'm wrong thinking what I am.

"I'm saying if it's what needs to happen, I'll bow out. I'll leave you alone. If having me around you is going to mess with your marriage, I just won't be around. I won't be responsible for wrecking a love like most people don't ever get to experience. It'd be seriously bad Karma."

"That means a lot, I mean, that you'd do that for me... but the idea that it'd be necessary sucks. Cause like, I may be weird and my relationship with Celery even weirder, but if it doesn't allow for other people to become important to me, to US, then it's so damn screwed up we're gonna end up hating each other. I don't want to ever hate Celery, cause even if I did I'd still love him, and the kind of miserable that would be I don't even want to think about. I also don't want to give you up, cause you're my dude and I love you."

"Hey Care, ever heard the expression you can't have your cake and eat it too?" His tone is gentle.

"This is not an impossible thing I'm asking for!" I protest. "I want to have a relationship with the guy I love, and I want to have friends. It's not exactly a new idea. It's been done. Like, come on it worked with Jonas!"

"No but that's different. That was a team effort. You both got to know him at the same time, he cares for you equally and vice versa. With me, man, Celery doesn't even LIKE me. And I don't think he ever will. For reasons even beyond the jealousy issues I mean. I know cause I don't really like him either. I think he's way too possessive and I don't know... a bit boring? I can only imagine what he thinks of me. So you see, we'd never be friends, him and me. And it's fine for you to have friends, but maybe the way you guys are just doesn't leave room for a friend that's for just one of you only. Especially when it's someone like me."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I don't like to share either. This isn't purely selfless, what I've been telling you. I've gotten used to being the main person in your life who was around. I'm spoiled now. I'm not too stoked on the idea of getting demoted you know? After awhile I'd get pissed off about it, and we'd probably start to fight. So maybe a nice parting of the ways now would save us some trouble later on."

"Why is nothing in my life ever simple?"

"Cause you're not that boring," He shrugs, like it's so obvious he didn't see the need for the question.

"May you always live in interesting times?" Rueful.

"Pretty much."

"Simple things up for me for awhile would you Colin? Just for like an hour, okay? I need to breath for just a little while."

He nods.

"Whatever you need Asparagus," And turns his back to me, once again hitting play on his cd player. Losing Grip starts to play, and I sigh comfortably, and relax against him.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Seventeen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Mon, 22 Mar 2004 18:15:38 -0600

The hour of solace I requested from Colin turns into about three, but my peace is broken by his voice as Colin commands,

"Hit the road," Shoving me with one shoulder.

I stand up obediently and start walking for the door.

"Dude, catch!" I turn back and hold out my hands.

It's Celery's hat. I took it off when I got here, and I clearly forgot about that.

There's symbolism floating around here somewhere.

"Thanks," I mumble.

"Hey, rock on," He calls after me.

I stop, half turn to him and say,

"Rock on. Peace out Avril," He nods and I leave.

I get home and Celery is spread out on the floor on his back, staring at the ceiling. The twins are squished together in a corner of couch muttering to each other about something while Kyle and Jonas dominate the rest of it, bickering in the way that they do when it's about something totally harmless.

Celery notices me first. He smiles.

"Hey." The smile is still there, and it's real.

I briefly consider not resisting the urge to do a quick victory dance, but in the end do. Resist I mean.

I don't give a verbal response, instead I walk right over to him, drop to my knees, lean down and kiss him.

"Best way to say hello ever." He intones.

"Glad you liked it."

Because it seems like the most natural thing in the world, I lie down

beside him, tucking one arm under my head and taking his hand with the other. For a long time, we just lie there in silence, the quiet noises of our brothers surrounding us, and I feel like this is exactly the way life is supposed to be, always. And I know it's all I'll ever want.

In a completely unsurprising turn of events, the extended moment is broken when Jonas suggests we all play Risk. Which, if you're playing with six people who'll all take it quite ridiculously seriously, is an all night game.

Celery and I confer briefly and announce we're down. The twins are also up for it, so the battle for world domination begins. It rages until almost 3 in the morning, and in the end Jonas manages to snuff out Kyle in a final death match for control over the Ukraine (Celery and I shout "The Ukraine is weak!" at the same time, a tribute to Seinfeld), only to be eradicated from the rest of the globe by Dave shortly thereafter. All in all, it was a damn fun night. Definitely worth the unfortunate amount of classes we'll all be sleeping through tomorrow.

With Dave ruling as Supreme Dictator of the world and contemplating which of us he'll refrain from sending out into the ocean on a log, we clean up the game and start slowly making our way upstairs. Half asleep against Kyle's shoulder Jonas murmurs something about how much shit he's going to get in with his parents for not calling a few steps ahead of Celery and I. The twins have suddenly remembered they have a History test tomorrow and are cursing under their breath.

In the hall at the top of the stairs we all pause, exhausted, thoughts of the following day on our minds. But we all share a grin.

"We should be doing that every week," Kyle declares, slapping one hand against the other for added emphasis.

His response is a chorus of nods, which officially caps off the evening. We go our separate ways to our respective bedrooms and at this point I can only speak for Celery and myself, but we went straight to the bed, collapsed, and passed out.

You know how sometimes details in life only stand out way after the fact? Like how you'll be going about your day, seeing and hearing, and something you'll see or hear will register, but only briefly, and it'll get shuffled to the back of your mind, only to pop up later, big as life? That's what happened to me this morning. The second I woke up, there was only was thing on my mind. And it's still there. On my mind. Gnawing away at me.

I haven't done anything about it, cause the person I need to have it out with happens to be asleep. And since he was up till three and it's only 7:30, I don't really have the heart to wake him up. Although, the longer

this sits with me, the more pissed I'm getting, so I probably won't need much longer for that to change.

Works out that I never get the chance. For the change of heart. About a minute before my rage reaches what would probably be critical mass, Celery wakes up.

"What the hell did you mean when you said you'd stay until Spring Break at least? Where you planning to leave early?"

He just lies there blinking at me, dumbfounded under the sudden assault.

"Uh..."

"Were you?"

He rubs his eyes, struggling to remain full consciousness.

"Celery?!"

"It crossed my mind." He admits hollowly.

"Did it?" My voice is tight and controlled, unlike my emotions.

"Care," He cajoles.

"Were you going to say good-bye first or were you just going to leave?"

"Of course I was going to "

"Is that why you asked me to go over to Colin's? To give you time to pack?"

"What? No!" Getting more alarmed by the second. "It was before, before we talked, Carrots, you don't really think I'd... I mean, you know I'd never lie to you like that right?"

I sigh, shaking my head.

"Yeah. I do. I'm just, you know."

"Sure." He says, sitting up and inching over to the corner of the bed furthest away from me.

"There's no way you get to be the mad one here Celery."

"Right," he says bitterly. "I'm always the bad guy. Always making your life so difficult. God. You must think about it all the time. How much

better than me you are, the stuff you put up with. Do you like it Carrots? Always feeling superior? Always being the one who gets begged for forgiveness? Does it make you feel special, thinking about how patient and understanding you are with poor, screwed up little Celery? Can't do anything on his own, can't even let you live your life like a normal person. But you LOVE me, so you put up with me. God, do you even LIKE me anymore Carrots? Remember when we were friends? When it was about how much fun we had together? How much we laughed, how we made each other happy? What do we have now? Misery that really loves a select company?"

"What're you... Celery?" I force out weakly, so taken aback, so frightened.

He gets up and paces around the room.

"You know what Carrots? You were right. It's not just me. I wanted it to be, cause that's how it works in my head. With me, it's NEVER you. You're always this blameless thing, beautiful and pure. Well that's just fucking stupid. And you're the same way. You don't see me. Not really. Not my anger, not my jealousy, my need for dominance. That's exactly our problem. We've always said it, but never the way we needed to. Never being serious. But it's true we've always been way too easy on each other. We put up with SO much. Just ignore it most of the time." He shrugs.

"You can be one seriously manipulative kid man. You don't notice stuff sure, but you play it up. Never know what's going on, nothing can ever be your fault right? So Kaleb was in love with you cause you hung out with him and acted exactly like he wanted you to. Not your fault you had no idea. So you're leading this Colin kid on the same way, offering him more than you can really give. What's the harm? He's straight after all. Like that's going to stop him from growing too attached, like it's all clear cut and dry. Things get out of hand with you two, how can you be to blame? You never saw it coming. The pressures you put on me, on how I know you want me to be, not your fault. You never meant it right? Didn't even realize what you were doing. I bet you think all you want me to do is love you." He looks thoroughly disgusted.

"Why are you saying this stuff?" My voice cracks, I want to start crying, but I realize if I did he'd comfort me, and even though this is horrible, I think it might be taking us exactly where we need to go.

"Because it's true. It just is. And all this, this year, it's all because of us never saying true stuff. That hard true stuff. Sometimes we'll even say it, but not with the anger or truth behind the words. I'm fucking pissed off Carrots. That's how I'm feeling. I hate this situation, cause it's making me hate myself. So that's exactly how I'm feeling. What do you got?"

"I think I'll take terrified with a side order of really sad." I mutter darkly.

"Fine. You think I'm being too hard on you? Am I lying? Making things worse than they are? Being a drama queen?"

I almost laugh. It's just, drama queen and Celery in the same sentence...

He smiles self-deprecatingly.

"It was bound to happen eventually."

"You really don't like me?" I whisper, having lost that brief moment of levity.

He sighs.

"I wonder a lot these days if I even know you," he's sounding gentle now, kind. "If I know myself. Beyond what we've always thought of each other, do we even exist? Is there a Carrots without the ` and Celery'? In reverse? I don't want to feel like the only reason I love you is because I always have. Like I'm trapped by our past and that's the only reason we're still together. If I had left, I'd like to think it wouldn't just have been for selfish reasons. Though, I can't deny that would have been a big part of it. But seeing you with Colin, that's a choice you made. You wanted to feel happier, to be more in the world, so you took the step and did it. You made the connection. You spend time with him cause he makes you happy, interests you. It's been driving me crazy, cause I think... maybe those aren't the same reasons you're with me anymore?"

"That's not true," I protest automatically.

He cocks his head to the side, "Isn't it? Can you honestly say having me back here has been good for you? Has it made your life better? Cause all I see is that it's made you sad and angry. I'm just causing you pain, and to be perfectly frank, that's all you're doing for me."

It takes me awhile to regroup after that one, but when I do, I respond with words never in a million lifetimes would I have ever expected to have come out of my mouth.

"So what? You want to break up?"

"I want nothing less." He says, coming to sit back down on the bed with me. "But I might want things that are impossible. Cause, in a way they pretty much centre on going back in time. Not possible and maybe not even advisable if it was. You've got a good life going here Care you don't think you'd be happier if I just left you to it?"

"No you fucking idiot I DON'T. All that shit you were saying before? About how we don't really see each other for who we are? Well that's damn right if you think I want you to go. You clearly don't see me at all if you think I'm happier without you."

"So what are we supposed to do? How do we make this better?"

"I don't KNOW. That doesn't mean we can just quit."

He sighs heavily.

"I know."

"We can't ever quit, you and me. We'll always be too important to each other." I hold out my wrist pushing it close to his face. "It means something, what we did last summer. It's security. Whatever happens, I look at this and I KNOW you love me. I know we'll never completely leave each other behind. And maybe right now it seems like all we're doing is stupid angsty shit, but I do LIKE you as well as love you. You make me happy, just you. That's why I want you to stay get it? I want to get past all the drama and just BE with you again. The way we were. With the laughing and stupid jokes and 80's movies and comforting routines."

"And the snarky blue haired sidekick one of us hates?"

"He's not my sidekick," I mutter poutily.

"Whatever. The fact remains."

"So you're saying I have to dump Colin? THAT'S the solution? I seem to recall you saying he wasn't even the problem."

"He's not. The problem is that our relationship doesn't make room for someone like him, or pretty much anyone else period."

"Somewhere Jonas and Kyle are saying, `what're we? Chopped liver?'"

"It's different."

"I know so everyone keeps telling me."

"Everyone?"

I throw him a look. "Colin."

"Of course."

"That's right. Get upset." Snark.

"See?"

"Fine. You're a possessive freak and I like it. We're royally fucked up and there's no way either of us can see out of it. Wonderful. I have to go to school." I get up and start rummaging through my drawers looking for clothes.

"Carrots, don't walk away from this." He pleads, standing also.

"From what? A fight that's going in circles?"

He shuts his eyes, wincing like my words were blows.

"Fine. Go. I think I'm going to stay here."

I'm in no mood to argue further about anything, so I just nod.

"Okay. I'll see you later then." I take the clothes I managed to gather and walk out of the room, letting the door slam behind me.

I meet Dave in the hall, he looks sleepy and confused.

"You guys were fighting AGAIN?"

I nod tersely, but offer nothing more, walking briskly into the bathroom and locking the door.

I'm surprised to find the kitchen empty when I get there, and eat quickly, hoping my luck will hold and I'll be able to leave for school alone as well. It doesn't. The twins are in the foyer putting their shoes on as I approach the coat rack and a second later a very bleary eyed Jonas is stumbling down the stairs.

Someone must have filled Jonas in, cause he's looking at me with the same mix of worry and reproach as the twins.

"If any of you lecture me I swear I'm going to get violent." I warn, gritting my teeth.

Jonas says nothing, but the twins share a look. When their eyes turn back to me, a very new emotion is there. Disgust.

"Fuck you Carrots." Jon sighs, before turning and exiting the house, with Dave hot on his heels.

Jonas is frozen, still three steps from the landing. I'm pretty stunned

myself.

Jonas makes the first move, shaking his head. "It's about damn time someone said it." He sighs and brushes past me, putting his shoes and following in the twins footsteps out the door.

I remain standing there for a long time.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Eighteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sun, 16 May 2004 23:56:10 -0500

There's clearly something wrong with me... but it's uncertain at this point exactly what it is. The end of University went brilliantly, I got kick ass grades which I am very smug about, and all my hopes about getting a crazy job at the weird vintage store a woman in my Sociology class was planning to open back in March have come wonderfully true. I've even been writing to some degree of personal satisfaction. And yet it's been a fucking life time since I last posted. As it always seems to be. Try to forgive me, and enjoy this anyway. At the very least, I hope there are still people out there who check this story every once in awhile to see that there's actually been an update.

At school, my very poorly suppressed rage has reached its boiling point, and I come very close to decking Alex the second I see him glaring at me across the hall. I'm on my way to do just that when Colin grabs me by the arm, nearly dislocating my shoulder as he yanks me stationary when I try to keep walking.

"What the fuck is this?" He demands, clearly knowing exactly what I planned to do. "Were you not something resembling okay not 24 hours ago? What happened between then and now that's gotten you so brassed off?"

"Celery was going to leave -- he was just going run out on me." I inform him petulantly.

Colin raises his eye brows, "So you two had another fight about it and naturally you decided running out on HIM in the middle was the most sensible course of action."

I just stare at him, as my brain frantically tries to process what he said, as he continues,

"Not like that'd in any way encourage him to leave now... I mean, what are the chances?"

Then it clicks. Probably pretty damn good. I'm going to rip out his rib cage and wear it as a hat (hello to the imagery).

"Fuck."

"Go." Colin orders, shaking his head.

I break out into a run that carries me out the school doors and all the way home. I make a mad dash up the stairs to the second floor, and pause, out of breath, finally when I've reached my own door and my hand is on the knob.

After catching my breath I turn the doorknob and walk in, despite the fact that in theory I was prepared for what I find, I still can't believe what I'm seeing. Celery's bent over his duffel bag, shoving in clothes and, distracted by his task, not noticing I've entered.

I stand for a small eternity, just staring at him. Waiting for my voice to catch up with what I'm seeing. Finally I laugh, short and angry.

He jerks, startled, and turns around.

"Going somewhere?" I shrug my hands at him and wander over to the bed, sitting down amongst his half packed things.

He wipes uselessly at silent tears and shakes his head.

"Care I..." He backs that statement up with nothing, instead opting to stand there carefully not looking at me and radiating anguish.

"What? Tell me you can explain this, cause really, I'd LOVE to hear you talk your way out of this one. But I mean, you can do it right? After all, we've been here before. You always have an answer, an apology, something. I want to hear you tell me you were going to leave me, without even saying good-bye, and still make me forgive you." My words are like the tears I refuse to let fall, they're bitter and angry and full of all my desperate confusion.

Celery himself seems equally lost, and the golden excuse I've demanded doesn't seem forthcoming.

He settles with stuttering out a few words,

"I just, I couldn't... I don't know how to be here and feel what I'm feeling. I didn't want to put --"

The moment he started to speak I knew I couldn't stand to hear it, so I cut him off saying, "You know what? Actually, I changed my mind. I don't want to hear about it. You were LEAVING. Nothing excuses that." I let the contempt in my voice ring loud and clear.

"Carrots..." He pleads.

"NO!" I all but scream, starting to feel the panic rush at me as well. Blindly, I search for a way to escape this, but find no refuge. I settle

for curling up in a ball, facing away from him.

"You're not going to let me talk?" He asks quietly after an age.

"You think you deserve to get to talk?"

"I don't know."

I sit up, and blaze my anger at him. "Well start thinking. Cause you better know, and fast. Hear me? I'm DONE with this. We're not kids anymore Celery. I can't keep doing this with you over and over. It's making me hate..." I can't say the rest of it. Can't even hardly think it.

"I was going to say goodbye -- I told you I'd never..." He his voice wavers and breaks off.

I let my head fall into my hands and I wait for tears or laughter to come. Neither do.

"But you really were planning on leaving."

A statement, but he answers it anyway.

"Yes."

"Why? I mean, after we talked, after you promised you wouldn't... why?"

"I thought you didn't want to know."

"That's cute. You're really helping yourself making comments like that."

"I don't want to fight with you."

Laughter is automatic, and entirely joy free.

"That's hilarious."

"Carrots I love you."

"Right. So naturally, you decided that abandoning me instead of like, say, trying to work something out was the best course of action."

"All I decided was that I couldn't stand to be here anymore!" He explodes.

It takes us both a minute to recover from that one.

"Wow. I didn't know I'd gotten so hard to be around."

"I'm not the one who bailed in the first place," he snaps, and then sighs, "Anyway it's not you,"

"Another classic. Surprise me Celery, tell me you thought it was for the best, that staying would have hurt me more. Tell me it was for my own good." I want to be shouting, but instead I'm deathly calm, even toned and quiet.

"It wasn't. It was for mine." His naked honesty shakes me.

"Then you should go." I say, shocking myself by actually meaning it.

"I know. It might not work and it might make things worse but I have to do something... I need to stop being like I am. Because it's the only way we can actually be together, but also because, first and foremost, I don't want to hate myself. And being like this... feeling like this, I do."

"What exactly are you feeling?"

I'm so confused, in addition to everything else. Because things haven't been ALL bad since he got back, and maybe I've been blind, but this is still taking me my surprise. Like big time surprise. Mostly just cause it's actually happening. Until now, I guess I didn't quite believe any of this was real.

"I want you." I snort, and he closes his eyes. "I don't want to share. I hate Colin -- do you understand? I don't even know him. But he makes you laugh, and he holds your attention, and for that I hate him. I can't be in your life if I'm like this. Right now I am. Maybe I can get better, but if not..."

"My god. You think you can decide that on your own? Since when are you the king of me? You don't just get to tell me where we're going, what we are. We decide that together. Remember for a second what we did this summer would you Celery? I MARRIED you. Legal or not, that meant something. The not walking away clause was definitely a part of it."

"Carrots I don't want to hurt you."

"You're going to make me laugh again, I'm warning you."

"I'm messed up." He protests.

"Great. So fucking what? Like I'm not? Like we both haven't always been. It doesn't matter. We love each other, that why we work things out instead of running away."

"What can I do? If I can't even do this... there's nothing." He won't

look at me, but I can see the grey in his eyes.

"If you leave now..." I shake my head.

"What? Tell me what would happen?" Something cold and almost threatening has crept into his voice.

"My heart would shatter -- in ways I doubt could ever be repaired."

He yanks me close, and kisses me hard, fast and brutally. Absent of love and affection, the message of the kiss is painfully clear -- ownership. I'm his and always will be, no matter what he does.

"You see? It's that... it's because of that that I have to go."

I don't know what to say. I just stare at him with wounded bewildered eyes. He sighs and sinks down onto the bed.

"I don't want to feel like this is the only thing I can do cause it's weak and selfish and none of the things I want for myself or for you. I want to do the TV thing where we forget about all our responsibilities and make bold declarations of love that win everyone over so no one could possibly ever think to stand in our way. I want to deny reality and escape into you forever. I want to protect you from everything, even the things you probably don't need protection from. I want to make this year go away, just erase it so we could be like we were. But my staying now wouldn't do that. I'm serious about my obligations back in Calgary, but it's more than that... I don't trust myself around you right now Carrots. If I stay, I won't get better, and you'll just learn to bend to my will again -- this is not an 'I'm god' thing or anything baby, serious. But I don't like the power we have over each other, it's dangerous. Right now I'm scared of the way I'm affecting you, and I'm scared of the way being around you is affecting me."

He gets up again, only to fall to his knees. He takes one of my hands and squeezes. I can't resist the pull of his eyes.

"I changed my ticket to tonight. I was NEVER going to leave without saying good-bye, I thought that when you got home from school, if I was already packed, we could talk about it, try to avoid some of the drama and pain. And I know Spring Break is almost done, and please don't think I'm leaving cause you're so unbearable to be around I can't even take a couple more days... it's just, I can't fall into that rut with you again Carrots. We've had a couple good days haven't we?"

I nod. It's part of why I've been so confused. Some of this has been bad in ways I didn't think possible, but there have such good moments too. I don't know why he's so ready to throw that away.

"And therein lies the problem. These highs and lows... as long as there are a few highs, if you keep trying to convince me to stay... I will. Past Spring Break I mean. And I know in theory that sounds like a great idea but I'm telling you Carrots we'll fall back into the same old patterns, I know we will. That won't be good for anyone. Because as much as he isn't the problem, my feelings for Colin are a symptom of what's wrong with our relationship and I don't want to put him and you through my attempts to work myself out."

"So this is you doing the Oz thing now? Gotta go run away and get all enlightened while I suffer in confusion doubt and oh yeah, those lovely feelings of betrayal and abandonment? And hello! Were you not here for the part of the conversation we had earlier today when you said this wasn't an all on you problem? What if I need your help getting better? What if I can't solve MY side of the problem without you?"

He shakes his head. "Baby -- that IS your problem. A big part of it anyway. And I blame myself for a lot of it -- but you're shit and doing things on your own. You're no good at facing problems on your own, you hardly even like making decisions by yourself. I'm not saying total self-reliance, but you've got to learn to stand on your own two feet and I'VE got to learn to LET you. This is OLD ground Care, and it'll just get older unless we actually DO something about it."

"Emphasis on WE!"

"Care..."

"You're going to leave no matter what I say, aren't you?"

For a moment I feel as if my heart is hanging in the air, and then he nods, and it crashes to the floor, breaking like glass.

And that's the end.

He stands, and as much as he can, keeps his back to me as he finishes stuffing a few final things in his bag. I get up off the bed and try to stand, not cower, in the corner of my room. Once finished packing, shoulders his duffle bag and walks to the door. Stops, a foot out of it, and turns back, coming towards me and touches my face. I'm too stunned by this entire scene to jerk away, though the gentle touch is like a knife to me. He starts to say something, I love you, but at that I have to stop him, that's something I can't stand to hear.

"No. Don't say that to me now. If you say it I won't be able to believe you, and I never want to not be able to believe you when you say that. If I hear you say that in a lie, I may not be able to trust every other time

you've said it,"

He tries to speak, but finally just nods.

I turn back one more time, to look into his eyes and try to find something familiar there. Something to bring comfort. I don't. And so I sigh, beating back the pain enough to be able to say what I need to.

Looking him squarely in the eyes I say, "This time it IS you leaving," and I reach up, taking off his hat. I want to shove it roughly into his hands, but I end up depositing it gently.

Then I really have to leave, have to get out of there, because the shock has faded some, enough for me to realize at least that this is really happening, and I don't want him to see him and feel this much pain.

I don't go downstairs. Jonas and the twins are probably at school, but Kyle's still down there somewhere. I mean, I'm sure he must have heard some of my yelling, so he probably knows something's going down, but... I mean, I don't know if I ever will be, but I'm certainly not ready to face anyone yet. What I do is I lock myself in the bathroom. I'm much too frozen to be crying anymore, but the picture isn't made any less pitiful. Sitting crouched down the shower, the door closed and the water on, getting soaked, my clothes sticking to my skin.

At some point I hear a faint knock, and Celery's voice. Out of the loyalty I still can't help but feel towards him, I stretch over and turn off the water, to hear what he has to say.

"It's not a lie Carrots. You have to believe me. I know this is the worst thing I've ever done, I know it, but I have to. It doesn't mean I don't love you. I do. That hasn't changed. It's not ever going to. I know I don't have any rights in this, I know it's me who's fucking everything up, but you know that saying it's the only way I can ever bear to say goodbye. I love you Care, I hope you can forgive me for needing to have said that, even with what I'm about to do,"

I say nothing, but hear no receding footsteps, so I know he's still there. I'm about to turn the water back on when he starts talking again.

"Is there anything I can do Carrots? I need to do this... I'm going to... I just, is there anything I can do to stop you from hating me when I do? If there's nothing, Carrots, just please talk to me."

Long pauses permeated that little speech, and an impressively long one follows it. I'm shivering in the shower stall, my eyes shut tightly. Desperately wishing he'd just go, and dreading it just as fervently.

Out of the silence comes a small, self-depreciating laugh from Celery.

"This is pretty um... well, let's go with cosmically stupid. Cause, actually, I'd rather have me hate myself than you. And if I leave, hating me is pretty much your right. God, what's wrong with me?"

At that, I get up, and yank open the door.

He stares at me wild eyed.

I grab him by the face and kiss him like he kissed me. And when I let him go I push him away so hard he ends up slammed against the wall.

"Don't play with me Celery."

He takes a few steps forward and opens and closes his mouth a couple times, but never gets around to saying anything.

I blaze my fury hurt and lust at him and his matched gaze knocks me back, but it doesn't matter that my knees are about to fail and I can't get to him cause he's launching himself on me and then I'm the one pressed against a wall, my mouth getting attacked and his hands all over me. We hear Kyle's frantic voice at the bottom of the stairs and he tears himself away from me, taking a step and then yanking me along with him into my room. I slam the door shut with one hand while I struggle with his clothing with the other.

When it's over, we're tangled together on the bedroom floor, aching in every possible way. It's a good 20 minutes before either of us has enough energy to move. We help each other to the bed, which seemed impossibly far away at the start, and crumble together once more.

"What the fuck was that?" I ask possibly years later, when I finally recover my voice.

His shrug gets interrupted halfway through by a pained wince. Concern takes over and I scan his body looking for injuries. I find plenty. His left shoulder is sporting a pretty decent set of teeth marks and he's scattered with cuts and what'll soon be bruises, in addition to the industrial strength hickies that cover his neck.

"I'm alright," He dismisses the nice crop of guilt I was cultivating, but that doesn't stop self-reproach and worry from flooding his eyes. "You okay?"

I nod carefully. I think I may have banged my head on something at some point. Possibly on the leg of my desk.

Strangely, I am. Okay. At least with what happened. Maybe I won't be when I get reacquainted with my brain and start to think about what happened and what it meant, but that's not now. Probably won't be for awhile. I can't bring myself to look at him though. Not because of the blood and the violence of what we just did, but because I know it hasn't changed anything. Because I know he's still leaving.

And here comes the funny part.

Because as you know, I'm all about the funny.

One man party, all that.

Here's a laugh, just for you.

Here's what he says to me, looking up at me from across the pillow, face caked with blood, some mine, some his, and mine no better.

Here's what he says to me after he's fucked me to oblivion, just as he's preparing to get up and walk out the door.

Here's the thing that makes me laugh so hard it breaks my heart.

"I love you Carrots."

And I'm laughing on the inside, cause I reply, "I love you Celery."

He strokes my face with his shaking fingers, and only has to look into my eyes once to know I know how little this has changed.

"I'm sorry." He whispers, turns his back on me for that I know is the last time.

I don't follow him with so much as my eyes, shutting them instead, and curling up into my pillow, waiting for him to get dressed and leave. When I finally open my eyes and look up, Celery's gone.

Into the emptiness where he used to be I whisper,

"Good bye,"

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Nineteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sat, 12 Jun 2004 21:49:25 -0500

So, as near as I can figure, I must have passed out. Cause I mean, I know waking up, and that's not what this is. This is coming to. Maybe it was the blood loss. Or the shock. That happens right? The brain can't handle a situation, so it just sort of shut downs for awhile?

If I'm not making this shit up, it's a solid bodily function, I must say. I could have used a couple more hours though. I don't feel entirely up to getting my angst on just yet. I mean, I'm sure there'll be crying and screaming in bucketfuls eventually, but I'm hoping for like, numb at this point. You know -- feeling nothing? I can't tell you how attractive of an option that sounds right about now.

And I haven't even opened my eyes yet. I mean I did, for the initial second when I was torn from unconsciousness, but there was brightness and I shut them again pretty damn quick. It's been about 15 minutes though, I'm thinking about giving it a shot. You might not think opening my eyes is all that impressive, but believe me. It's huge.

My gradual eye open process has very unfortunate results. Cause with my vision, I've got that whole ability to see the stuff around me thing, and the stuff around me happens to contain Kyle, Jonas, my parents, and my destroyed room, which looks very much like a small bomb went off in it. Oh yeah, and me. Naked and bloodied. Thank god I have a sheet over me at least.

"What are you all doing here?" I demand softly.

"We were worried honey, Kyle said there was yelling and other noise and now..." My mom tapers off, too worried about what stating the facts would do to me to carry on.

"Celery's gone." I say. Sorta flatly.

"We know."

Again, it was my mom that spoke, but all of them have the exact same expression written on their face. Concern for me warring with concern for Celery (who I'm guessing at least Kyle saw leave) and general disappointment and frustration with both of us. And then there's the fear. There's a lot of fear.

I feel a bit like everything is happening in slow motion, or that it's not exactly happening at all, and I can stop and start it again whenever I

want. Like now, the world is on pause, cause they're all still standing around my wrecked room, staring at me, but I feel independent of them. I look around at the damage, the collapsing bookcase, the clothing debris everywhere, the blood stain on my carpet, the other one on the wall, idly wondering if I'll have to buy a new lamp or just use the cracked one. Then my eyes fall on my door.

"Wasn't it locked?" I ask, aloud but to myself.

"We broke in." Kyle supplies.

Of course. I see evidence that it was forced. I just thought maybe Celery and I did that too, somehow. Logic's working kind of slow for me right now.

"I need clothes." I say vacantly.

Everyone rushes at once to hand me some, and then I glare at them until they all turn around. No amount of glaring was going to get them to leave though. Shame that.

After I'm passing for dressed, we all engage in some meaningful staring. And sighing. It's fun.

"I'm okay." I offer suddenly, turning my face up to look at my parents. A kind of frantic concern has grown to dominate their faces since I started zoning in and out a few minutes ago.

"Carrots..."

"No. Seriously. It's weird. Isn't it? I mean, my husband just abandoned me. I should feel awful right? Crying or something at the very least. But I feel kinda of... good?"

"Carrots," Mom beams urgently, "you don't have to get through this alone. Don't try,"

I shrug.

"M'not. I'm really okay." I try to prove my point through standing, but my legs give out and I end up sitting down heavily. "I just may need to go to the hospital."

Nobody seems to find the humor in that but me.

I decide to close my eyes and wait for them to leave. It worked once right?

But naturally, it only worked that time cause my heart got broke in the process. Where's the fun without that?

"Please just leave me alone, okay? I just want to lie down a little more."

"Could it be you're a little worn out from the head wound?" There you go Kyle. Sarcasm over the panic. Works every time.

"I'm fine, I told you. Just tired."

"It's 3 o'clock in the afternoon." Jonas does pointedly dry comments just as well as Kyle.

"Three?"

"In the afternoon."

"In the afternoon?"

"Three."

Well that was fun.

"Look, I'm not up for an inquisition right now alright? Can't you guys just leave the poor divorcee alone?"

I bring the house down.

"You... it's..." Kyle's got nowhere to go with the whole verbal thing, and he's not alone. Even the olds are shocked wordless.

It's like the flip switches, and everything is suddenly back in real time, and I can't stand anything -- certainly not having any of them here and I'm about to scream myself hoarse, when I hear tapping on my balcony window.

On reflex, I turn and look and am faced with probably the only person I can stand to be around right now.

Colin. He raises his eyebrows and gives me a kind of droopy pleading puppy dog look. I almost smile.

I get up and let him in.

He never gets the chance to say hello, instead does a pretty humorous and entirely genuine double take. He gives up staring googely eyed at the chaos that is my room and the glaring faces of my family to looking horror stricken at my face.

"What the hell happened to you?" He demands, rushing me, hands cupping my face, gently tilting it so he can get a better look.

"You should see the other guy. Really. I think I might have killed him."
These words, this flippant attitude, it's the only safe place to be.

Colin says nothing, just keeps touching me, finding new damage everywhere. I close my eyes and let him do it, wishing it was just us in the room. No one else.

"Come sit down Asparagus," He says gently but firmly, leading me towards the bed. I never even bother opening my eyes.

I sort of collapse into him, and let out one choked sob while he runs his fingers through my hair. There's movement around us, and Colin's voice, "Back off." A few seconds later, the door gets shut. I open my eyes.

Everyone's gone. It calms me down and scares me at the same time. I'm falling fast, so completely vulnerable that every change unsettles me.

I've been leaning against him, but mostly sitting up, and Colin inches away and then encourages me to lie down, his hands on my upper arms, in places he's already learned it's safe to touch.

"Sleep for a little while or something okay? Close your eyes and -- don't laugh at this suggestion -- try to be calm at least alright?"

I don't bother to nod or anything, just get my head into the place on my pillow I like and follow his instructions. When I wake up, it's dark, and Colin is perched my chair, one of the only pieces of furniture in my room to escape hurricane Carrots and Celery.

He watches me wake up, and doesn't speak until I've propped myself up on my pillow.

"What happened?" All the people who hate him should hear Colin now. They should see the tenderness in his face.

Because it's Colin, because it's actually been long enough for it to finally start to seem real, my defenses break down and I start to cry, but am able to respond brokenly,

"He's..." uncontrollable sob break, "g-g-gon-nnne,"

"Celery?"

I nod and cry at the same time. Wishing I could go back to pretending it hadn't happened, cause that was a much less painful place to be.

"Fuck me," Colin mutters to himself, looking pale. "I can't believe he actually did it." I sniffle and it's like he just remembered I was in the room, and turns his attention back to me. "Was he already gone when you got back? What happened? How did you get so worked over?"

I just shake my head, and understanding, Colin goes back to doing the silent supportive thing.

After almost an hour, I've settled somewhat, and he looks at me gravely, hands on my cheeks, thumbs brushing away tears.

"Carrots," his voice is strong, and there's a warning, like he can hear what I'm thinking, the voice in my head that screams my blame, "You're not going to dare to think it's your fault, are you? Cause you know I'm not going to stand for that,"

I smile weakly. "I know,"

His eyes survey me with gentle sadness, concern, and love.

"You need a few more hours?"

"No, I think I'm ready to talk about this now, but you're going to have to help."

"How can I do that?" Gentle, eager to do whatever it takes.

"Ask me the questions I don't want to answer."

He sighs, like he's wishing as badly as I am they didn't have to be asked.

"How did you get hurt?"

"We... it was. I don't know. I was so angry and there was pain that I really didn't want to feel but he wouldn't stop talking and he was leaving but he wouldn't go away, you know? I couldn't stand it. So I opened the door and I just..."

"You started it?" He's incredulous.

"Colin, I don't know what exactly you think happened, but it wasn't like I punched him or something."

"So what'd you do?" He's not doing this just to make things harder on me, I think he really doesn't get it.

"I kissed him. Well, after I threw him against a wall."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"So that, you should have seen the other guy comment?"

"Yeah."

"And then after..."

"He left."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thanks."

"Do you want me to "

"Keep going."

"Alright. I guess... I mean, how did it happen? How did you get to angry and in pain and throwing people against walls?"

I suck in a few deep breaths, and collect myself a little.

"I ran all the way from the school and when I got up to my room," I find I can't quite go on.

"Take your time man," I do the steadily breathing thing again until I feel my heart start to stop racing.

"He was packing. I couldn't believe it -- I mean, I still can't. Even when he admitted to having thought about it, I NEVER thought he'd actually DO it. We don't leave. We always talk stuff out, we always talk until its better. Ever since ever. But he was packing. Leaving. And I couldn't even bring myself to try to talk him out of it. I just couldn't do it. Tell him the stuff I have so many times he should know it by now. I don't know how he could do this,"

"Me neither man. Me either a thousand times from the bottom of my heart and everything I know about the guy. But you know he loves you right? No matter what, I'm sure that couldn't ever change. Like, I've seen the way the dude looks at you, know what I'm saying? That doesn't just go away,"

"Fine. So he loves me. Fine fucking way to show it. You don't back up words with deeds, and they become meaningless,"

"Oh don't say that," he entreats softly, "you know he loves you. Come on, you've told me so. You trust his love for you like you trust that you don't have to see a mid-season reality TV replacement show on FOX to know it's going to suck. Remember when you told me that? This may sound really unfair to you, but those were your words. They're the ones you're going to have to back up with YOUR deeds. You can't just give up on that faith you have in him. There have to be allowances when it turns out the people we love happen to be human -- which means being big stupid assholes sometimes. Tell me I'm wrong?"

"Okay, not in theory, but it hurts... god Colin, it hurts so much," starting to cry all over again.

"I can't even begin to imagine how much, but stay with me on this man. Don't give up,"

I know he's right. I know it. Except I feel like I already have. And I'm not sure how to go back from that.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sun, 11 Jul 2004 21:58:02 -0600

Waking up beside Colin is a world of weird. I can't remember when we fell asleep, but judging by how incredibly tired and drained I feel, it can't have been too long ago. My check with the clock makes me groan. It's only 7 o'clock in the morning. But on the bright side, no one might be up yet.

I shake Colin gently awake. He makes a `mnnhh' sounds and wrinkles his face.

"What time is it?" Voice still thick with sleep and gravely.

"Early, 7ish."

He mirrors my groan of a few seconds ago. "How you doing?" He's barely awake and already he's asking me that.

How did Colin become that guy? Why is he here putting up with me? It's always been Celery. Is that actually over? Was his leaving Celery's version of surrendering the title?

"I'm just the relief pitcher man," Colin answers my silent questions to myself, starting to sit up. He runs a hand through his hair.

"He'll be back. I promise you that. You know him better than me so you've gotta know that too. I could never do his job, and I refuse to try to be him. I'm here being me. I'm not him, and I'm not going to try to be not even for a little while. But you're my friend you're like the only friend I've ever had who wasn't like at least 20 years older than me I've grown rather partial to your company. But I especially enjoy your company when you haven't lost all hope and joy in your life. So I'm just trying to help in a situation I pretty much know there's nothing I can do. Gonna be okay with that?"

Somehow I nod. He smiles. I'm starting to forget what it looks like when he isn't doing that sadly.

"Just tell me one thing. Is Celery going to bust me up for snaking his boo?"

Laughter erupts from somewhere I'd already started to forget about. Colin grins.

"Give me a hug bro, then you gotta go like, re-enter the world. Another thing I won't be standing for is you using me to hide from everyone else.

There are people out there who've known you considerably longer than me and who love you at least as much hey I'll admit it, probably a little more. So this one night of sanctuary was what you needed, and I'm honored that I'm the one you chose to let in, but now it's time for the rest, okay?"

"You're not going to give me any breaks are you?"

"Not the ones I know you can make it without,"

I hug him, which is my surrender. "Okay, let's do this,"

I get up, but Colin is still sitting.

"Coming?"

His face is uncertain. "Uh, I think maybe not. I mean, you need to go down there, and be with your family and everything, but I think it would probably better if I just go out the window, you know?"

"No," I say slowly. He sighs.

"It just, wouldn't look very good you know? Us walking down together. Plus no one in your family likes me already. This isn't likely to help matters,"

"If you really want to, you can go, but," I bite my lip, feeling a bit stupid. "I'd really like you to come," that makes up his mind, and he jumps up purposefully.

"Down we go."

I can't help but smile.

When we enter the kitchen together, Jonas and Kyle look positively ready pounce on Colin and begin attacking him with the bare hands. The twins are much of the same. Colin turns to me and sighs.

"I told you I should have gone out the balcony."

I scowl, but it's not meant for him.

"Don't be an idiot," I turn back to the glowering hordes. "That goes for you too. The only reason I'm not still locked in my room sobbing my heart out is because of Colin. He's my friend so you all had better start treating him with a little more respect." I glare at them definitely, daring them to speak out against what I've said.

"Carrots, don't tell me it's true," Kyle begs weakly. "I mean, what

Celery's been thinking... you're not actually--"

"No of course not. That's just stupid. We're FRIENDS. Like hello - he's straight,"

"Like for real straight, not pretend like you guys." He says to Kyle and Jonas. Okay, so there's a reason they don't like him. Still.

They glare at him for awhile, but then, I'm guessing because they caught the lost miserable look on my face, Jonas and Kyle elect to ignore Colin and reach out to me.

"I'm like so much more sorry and sad about all this then I can't even think about," Kyle says to me, putting his hand on my shoulders.

I nod.

"I'm really," I just hug him, knowing Jonas is dying, with no way to end that sentence. He hugs me back gratefully.

"Don't kill me or anything, but I've got to say this," I look over to Kyle, waiting. He sighs. "It's gonna be okay. Somehow, I swear." I haven't even like an ounce of the strength to nod, but I hold an arm out to him, making it a three-way group hug between me, Jonas and Kyle.

When we let go, Colin is out in the hall, already in his shoes, but he had them from upstairs.

"Leaving?" I ask, following him out. He nods.

"Yeah. They've got you covered for now," I sort of scrunch my face and Colin puts a hand on my shoulder. "I can't get you through this alone, you're going to need all the help you can get. Don't turn it down when any kind of help is offered. You know better than any of us how hard it's going to be for you to even get through the next couple days, so let people help you, alright?"

"Yeah, alright."

He gives me a quick hug. "I'll see you again soon."

"I don't think I'm going to be able to make it to school today,"

He exhibits no surprise. "I think taking a bit of time off is a good idea. I'll call you this afternoon, though, okay?"

"Sure. See you later,"

He pauses uncertainly, and then holds out his hand.

"Rock on, rock on?"

I grip the offered hand. "Peace out Avril," We shake gently, release, and Colin leaves.

I return to the kitchen, where the entire family has remained, sitting around the table, waiting for me. I feel myself being hit with another massive wave of grief.

"I really need you guys right now," I manage to choke out.

Then I crumple to the ground.

When I come to, I find myself laid out on the couch with seven pairs of worried eyes fixed on me. As everything about the past 24 hours slowly returns to me, it's as if it's hitting me for the first time and I start to weep. I have all my family around me but I've never felt more alone.

Oh God how did this happen?

After I don't know how long, a new feeling comes over me. Rage. Rage like I've never experienced. It's as if winter has arrived in my soul. Cold, quiet, dark, bitter January like winter. The kind where it doesn't seem there could be any hope for spring. Not ever. Under this new influence, I feel myself growing strangely calm. The rage is like a blanket over everything, blocking out the pain and loss. It's like I'm so frozen nothing can touch me, and somehow that's a comforting, soothing thought.

I blink at them all several times, before arranging my face to match my odd inner calm.

"Hi," I say, my voice like snow. Soft and nearly silent. Muffled.

"Oh honey," mom coos, drawing me into a hug. I hug her back, patting her back reassuringly.

"I don't want to talk about it. Any of it. Everybody understand?" I allow lightness to soften the edges of my words. She holds me by the shoulders, eyes full of concern and questions.

"Carrots, honey. You have to talk about it pretending it didn't happen won't "

"That's not what I'm doing. You think I don't know what happened? You think I'm not feeling it every second?" I shake my head. "Talking about it WON'T make it better. This is my last word, got it people? Next time

any of you bring it up, I'm just walking."

"Carrots this isn't "

"Okay. I'm going to school. See you guys later."

I take advantage of their shock to make a hasty get away out of the living room and up the stairs.

When I get in the shower, memories come flooding back for an instant, and I almost break down, but I quickly push the feelings away. The dull, voiceless rage returns, and I turn on the water.

When I exit the shower I catch a glimpse of my reflection and it shocks me into stasis. My skin looks almost grey, bruises are starting to show, scattered across my chest and arms. Cuts and bite marks too. My eyes look hollow, but I try to tell myself it's just the exhaustion. It doesn't work and I hate the sight of myself. I want to be strong. Powerful. I want to look like someone that nothing can touch, nothing can hurt, so that's what I can become. But instead I look like someone who's cried way more than their share, someone who has lost everything, and knows it. Someone who fought and lost, in a battle that nobody won.

I close my eyes, and take a step back. I bite down on my lip hard enough to draw blood and wait for the strength I found in my anger to return. I settle for a half calm, and try to ignore the way my hands shake violently as I attempt to patch myself up a little.

I get dressed among the ruins of my room, but block out every image that doesn't fit neatly into my desire for my bulkiest articles of clothing. An attempt to hide the physical manifestations of the pain I'm trying to ignore. Dressed, I shut my door firmly behind me, wanting everything that happened there to stay locked behind the closed door.

Downstairs again, but my next route of escape is far from barricade free.

Kyle first, who is on me before I'm even all the way down the stairs, trying to reason with me in his own way, which of course involves yelling and threats of physical interference with my attempted exit. Jonas saves me unintentionally by tugging on his hand and telling him to calm down. I slip past them as a small argument erupts, Kyle in angry mild hysterics and Jonas desperately struggling to remain calm himself and calm Kyle down at the same time.

I get my shoes and jacket on, but when my parents block the door, they're wearing their resolve faces on (I've seen them before, I know what they mean!). I want to scream, but I just close my eyes and press a thumb hard against the bruise that's wrapped around my left wrist, distracting myself

with the pain, waiting for them to get out of my way.

"Carrots, you can't go to school. Even if your emotional state wasn't what it is, you're not physically up to it. Son, you've barely slept, you've covered in cuts and bruises." And here I was hoping the clothes would fool them. "And besides all that, the shock and stress of Celery's," it's in this moment that I realize I can't hate the sound of his name, "leaving has taken its toll on your body. You need to rest, you need to eat something, and then you need to start talking about this." It's my dad, so it's firm, and yet gentle, unyielding, but loving.

And I'm working hard to forget every word.

"Please get out of my way." My hands are curled into tight fists.

"Don't make me pull brute squad." Kyle's voice from behind me, the skirmish with Jonas apparently over.

My head is pounding and I just want to get away. I need to make them understand I have to go to school, because if I don't, then something's wrong, and this all really did happen. But deeper, the part of me that knows it did, whether I go to school or not, still wants to go. Because I want to be strong, and if I'm strong, then this hasn't beaten me, and I show that by living like it was just a regular day. Something I'm still capable of facing.

"I need to do this."

"Not yet, not now. You HAVE to rest, honey, please. We're worried about you. This is no time to be blocking us out, we need to grieve together."

Grieving is exactly what I won't let myself do. She needs to understand that.

"I'm going to school."

"No, Carrots "

"You can't stop me!"

"If we have to, we will." My dad says softly.

I want to cry, but I won't let myself.

"Don't you understand? You're just making this harder for me. Talking about my feelings and getting some bed rest will not bring him back. It won't change why he left or why I didn't stop him. So just please, let me go."

My speech, short but more genuinely spoken than anything previous, gets me as past my parents and shouldering my backpack.

"Wait up!" I turn, cause Jonas is slipping hurriedly into his shoes and grappling with his denim jacket. He flashes Kyle a look, some desperate thing, some hurried and uncertain promise. Like, if I'm going, at least if Jonas comes with me, there's someone to catch me when I fall.

I tell myself I'll let him come along, just to prove to everyone that I'm not going to.

So we leave together, and Jonas trails after me the whole way to school, his face contorted as he desperately searches for a way to reason with me, but I just keep on doing the calm thing. I even go as far as to try to comfort him, which seems to freak Jonas out most of all. I want to plead with him to stop acting this way, because the putting this behind me thing would work a whole lot better if other people would do their part, but if I did that, it would just be another sign that nothing's okay. If it ever will be again.

School itself is muted and strange. It's like the sound's been turned down all around me. I'm aware of the noises, the people, talking, staring, whispering. I see and I hear, but it's all like a quiet buzzing in my ear. Like static. I'm not on the right frequency. But I'm too tired to try and find it.

The shock in Colin's eyes at seeing me registers briefly, as does the look of weary acceptance that follows it. By the time I'm walking closer to him, it's like he already knew. It's like in his head he's reminding himself he should have expected this. I feel that little part of me trying to speak up again, wanting to ask how he knew, and why the knowing is making him look like he does, but it's too quiet. Too weak to overcome to force of denial in my brain.

Oblivion is everything. It encompasses all. It is my refuge.

For the next couple days, that's how it is. It's all I'm capable of. That empty, flippant tone. That baseless cheer over seething anger that doesn't fool anyone for a second, but is all that keeps me going. Cause if I can pretend hard enough that it hasn't affected me, that I don't care, I guess maybe the dream is that eventually the myth will become the reality.

And for the next two weeks, that is life. Trying to cling so hard onto anger that I won't have to admit or face any of the things that will lead me to feel everything I'm very not ready to. All I can bear to feel is my rage, and so I wrap it around myself tightly, never letting it out lest if I do I'll be stripped of my last defense. I take my comfort and refuge in

the act, outwardly calm and serene, while inside I'm hollow and broken. I can't say I'm heart broken exactly, it's more like I haven't got a heart at all. That along with everything else, my heart has been taken away from me, and the empty place where it used to be in my chest is all I'm left with.

This is how I'm dealing (or very much NOT) but naturally, I'm not the only one who has been affected. I haven't gone so deep into myself that I can't see that. Even though I'm not doing anything to make it better. The twins are angry, but in their hurt and confusion, I think they're having a hard time trying to figure out whom to be angry with. My own anger consumes me, but it's faceless. I haven't been able to determine who to direct it at. Kara is almost as silent as me, though she doesn't have that falsely okay thing going for her. She's been home more than usual though, and I don't think I've seen Sue over here once since Celery left. That's pretty weird, since they're usually together every possible second. Jonas and Kyle are clinging to each other just like I wanted to cling to Celery while they were going through their most serious problems. Wanting to assure each of their love and presence in the face of this much loss and brokenness. They're also the ones that come to me the most, trying to get me to talk or cry or show any sign of genuine emotion. Something beyond patient fury.

Their concern disrupts my performance as I have to again and again try to get them to move on. Forget like I want to believe I have. Hate everything instead of feeling anything. But again and again they come to me, with fun and new ways to break through, but instead of appreciating it, I just wish they would stop.

Worse than Kyle and Jonas however, is my mom. She's better at it than them, for one thing. More practice I guess. She's the only one who's come close to getting me to break down. I think it's something to do with her eyes. Mothers have some powerful looks in their arsenal, and I think my mom's got to be one of the best there is.

Dad's giving me trouble too. He sighs a lot in my general direction, and gives me these deeply concerned stares that make the hair stand up on the back of my neck. He's also tried to have 'father son' talks with me a few times, and I have talked to him, but not the real stuff. Just the mantra that is my best defense. Saying I'm fine in the desperate hope that one time I'll say it, and it'll finally be true.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty-One
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Tue, 27 Jul 2004 20:52:13 -0600

I've sort of lost track of the day of the week, but I'm at school, so it's a week day. I can tell you that much. The weekend is a blur, but not a total blur, so I'm thinking it can't have been all that long ago. So basically, it's probably Monday or Tuesday.

Either way, right now I'm walking to my locker with Colin. I'm trying to keep up a conversation about our law assignment, but he's not really holding up his end. More occupied sighing and giving me calculating looks, which, by the way, are starting to wig me out.

"Dude, why are you looking at me like that?" I ask when I can't stand it anymore.

He shrugs.

"No reason really. I guess I was just thinking, and I don't know, I just sort of realized it's a good thing that you're okay with what's happened."

Okay, suspicion. I mean, don't think I didn't hear the last part of that comment, you know, the part that says PS this is a trap.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah I mean, why should you get all torn about Celery leaving anyway? He's kind of an asshole. So he was your best friend for like your whole life, I get why you felt like you had to be loyal to him, but you're obviously realizing that you've grown out of him. And, no big loss, that, really. I mean, he seemed pretty boring to me. You probably just didn't realize how uncool he was until after he went away for awhile and you started hanging around some actual interesting people. And okay, not gay, but I still don't think he was that good looking. He has that whole dumb jock thing working for him, lots of muscles or whatever, but there's really no substance. Just fluff."

Every word Colin speaks is like a spark, and the more he talks the bigger the flame. By the time he finishes talking, there's a raging fire of well, rage, burning inside me. But new, because unlike before, it's wild and uncontrolled.

"I bet he can't even " And very suddenly, I have Colin slammed up against the lockers.

"You don't talk about him like that," I hiss furiously. "He may have left

but he's still mine and I still love him and you DON'T say that shit about him. You don't even know him." I give him another vicious shake, but Colin only stares back at me impassively.

We stare into each other, and I feel all my rage draining, giving way to shock and horror. I turn away from him, and slide down the lockers onto my knees. Colin is quickly at my side, fighting to keep eye contact, and forcing me to stay with the emotions as they scream and churn inside me.

That little split second of surrender, of letting the emotion come back free and honest pretty much opened the floodgates. Unable to hold it in any longer, I break down right there, and sob into myself, as Colin looks on from a foot away, careful not to interfere with needs to be done. I'm aware in only the vaguest sense of all the people around me, kept at bay only by wariness and Colin's glares. I think Jonas might be watching from a distance as well, but I'm so lost in myself and the pain of my release, I only keep on crying.

"Colin I love him," I whisper weakly after an eternity. He nods.

"I know." And he's not happy or sad about it, he's just recognizing that it's true.

Then Colin's backing away, and Jonas is brushing his fingers angel soft on my wet cheeks and I'm looking at him through the tears that are still falling silently, and I feel like I haven't seen him in months, and maybe it a way that's more true than I'd like to admit. I close my eyes and his arms, which are ridiculously strong to be so small, are around me, first to embrace, and then to aid my standing. Colin lets all this happen, again, refusing to interfere. I smile at him sadly, gratefully, and then leaning against Jonas, start walking away.

After that fun little event, which I now fondly refer to as the Locker Incident, I spend some quality time wallowing in my room. Listening to depressing music, crying, raging, staring bleakly at nothing, yelling at no one, and generally feeling everything I tried so hard to shut out the first two weeks.

My parents came to me that first night, and I wasn't nearly strong enough to build protective walls of nonchalance and apathy in response to their frank and blushing intimate questions about the events leading up to Celery's departure. I was mildly alarmed when words like `abuse' and `battery' got thrown around, and scrambled to explain to them how very unlike that it was.

"It was something we did to each other, not him to me. And I can't... I mean, you're my mom and dad, I'm not exactly up for discussing sex of any kind with you, certainly not sex involving ME, but that's what it was. And

whatever we did was..." I struggle for a nice clinical sounding word like the ones they were using. "Consensual." What I said failed to totally erase the fear and suspicion in their eyes, so I forced myself to go on. "Whatever pain and fury I'm feeling, all the varied and horrible things that are making me act in all the gloriously self destructive ways I've been these past weeks... it has nothing to do with the... whatever physical stuff went down between us." I can't quite finish this thought all the way, into actually verbalizing his leaving and what it's done for me, but the doubt has been banished from their eyes.

My mom kisses the top of my head and my dad squeezes my shoulder.

"Okay son."

On day three, I've actually come far enough that I find myself able to look at some pictures of him. Of us. This inevitably leads to much more crying but that was pretty much a mortal lock.

That afternoon, curled up into myself, still trying to recover from the images of us still swimming in my head, focusing hard on thinking about nothing, there's a knock on my door. I'm not especially surprised. There's always someone who drops in a couple times over the course of a day, just to check on me, and maybe force some food into me.

This time it's Jonas.

"Hey," He says quietly, using that broken glass tone everyone does with me these days. Like I could break at any second, which of course is true.

"Hi," He holds up something in his right hand and smiles sort of awkwardly.

"Um, I've got something for you," I raise my eyebrows slightly in response. He edges closer.

"It's, well, I know you're like into music a lot these days or whatever, and like, I thought I'd give this to you. It's um, Stereolab? I don't know if you've heard of them. Anyway, it's pretty good, and like, it'll mellow you right out," I smile a little bit. A sad half smile, and not really a smile at all, but it's something.

"Kind of like ocean sounds?"

He smiles for real. "Yeah, and it's also like, good for a wallowing in melancholy if that's what you're going for."

No need for me to comment on that one.

"Does it have singing?" Asking since I know he's all anti-lyrics and

vocals.

"Sometimes, but it's easy to ignore, and also, not usually in English. Which works for me," I reach out, and he meets me half-way to hand over the cd.

He gives me a 'see ya later then' type nod and turns to leave. I lie back down and pop the cd in.

At the last minute, when he's already got one foot out the door I call back,

"Hey Jonas,"

He turns, blinks at me.

"How are you doing man?"

"What?"

"I just... I care about that. I mean, I know I haven't been acting like it lately, but I do. I care about you, I love you. I want to know if you're okay, and talk to you about why if you're not and just... I want to deserve to be your brother."

He looks momentarily overcome, and then is beside me on the bed in a flash, and for the second time in recent history, we're hugging for dear life.

"You'll always be my brother Carrots, and not just cause I plan to trick Kyle into marrying me someday. Because I love you right back, and that's not going to change. Even if you do get wrapped up in yourself and forget about how awesome I am every once in awhile." His grin saves me from wanting to weep with guilt, and I just nod.

"Thanks."

He punches me in the arm.

"Don't mention it."

"I still want to know, I mean, I'm glad we could have this touching moment," he laughs softly, "But I asked cause I wanted to know. How are you?"

"You mean about Celery's leaving?" He asks this very carefully, gauging my reaction about every word passes his lips.

I don't respond right away, but I don't freak out either. Eventually, I

shake my head.

"No, or at least, not specifically. I guess I was mostly asking about the whole Jonas Picture. I'd been missing out on what's been going on in your life before all this stuff happened."

He's too nice to openly and heartily agree, and I save the joking comment/Xander quote, "don't all jump to disagree" for another time.

"I'm doing okay Care, a lot better than you are right now."

I sigh.

"That doesn't matter or it shouldn't anyway. Just cause I've decided to go around the bend again and have another melodramatic angst fest doesn't mean your pain or happiness or boredom or whatever isn't important. My stupid drama shouldn't make other people's lives matter less. I don't want to act like that anymore."

Jonas looks like he's trying hard not to raise his eyebrows in deep skepticism. I wish I didn't deserve for him to.

"Help a brother out," I beg at least partly jokingly.

"Well, it's not that I was lying. This shit with Celery's thrown everyone into the pain orbit, but it's not like I have to tell you that. In other news... that's where the okay part isn't a lie. Things with my parents are... they're not great, but they are improving. We've worked up to them just disliking Kyle cause he's dating me, not disliking him cause he's a GUY who's dating me. So that's progress. And he's been amazing about it. If you want to put your guilt to use, thank him sometime for me. Because he's a good man, and I'm beginning to realize this thing probably would have happened with me anyway, but later when I was even less equipped to handle it and with someone who would never be able to be all the things Kyle is to me."

I take his hand and squeeze it, and Jonas laughs, and it's a laugh I've heard from myself too many times, one covering a sob.

"Wow. I didn't realize how close to the surface that stuff was," He mumbles kinda sheepishly.

"Thank you for still trusting me to hear it."

He tilts his head and smiles wanly.

"Don't forget I loved YOU first. I'm always going to want to tell you stuff, be close to you. It's kinda of why I wanted to be your friend in

the first place."

I can't answer that without tears of my own, so I just give his hand another squeeze.

We sit together like that for a long time, and it's the best I've felt in a long time.

Day four is bad, as I suffer an almost totally regression after the activities of the previous day. Mostly I lie on my bed and try to find my way back to that empty place but before I do the twins stop in to check on me. Instead of searching even harder, I let them in and we talk for awhile. About nothing really, but it gets me through the really shaky period and keeps me grounded.

On the fifth day, I do a dangerous thing. I put in the Princess Bride. Okay, so first I spend pretty much the whole morning staring at the box frozen by indecision, but come on. It's still a huge step a big huge hard one that almost causes me to trip into oblivion.

About half-way through, Kyle stops by and I pause the movie, grateful for the break.

"Hey,"

"Hey,"

"Whadd'ya doing?" I nod at the screen.

"Watching the Princess Bride." He makes a `whoa' face.

"How's that going?" I shrug.

"Oh, you know. Something funny'll happen and I'll laugh, then I'll remember and start to cry. But you know progress." He nods.

"Yeah. I thought it'd take you a lot longer to get here." I understand what he means.

"Well, it sorta did. I mean, it seems like I've only been dealing for five days and in a way that's true, but it's happening fast because there's such a back log of emotion I've been having to deal with coming from the other two weeks of denial and repression. All the making up for lost time is just speeding everything up. It's more compressed this way, more intense, but it's faster too." He looks at me very seriously.

"Are you actually starting to feel better? I mean, for real? Cause no one is asking you to rush ANYTHING. We just want you to be able to be honest

with yourself. And really feel whatever's there. That's the only way you'll ever get to be okay again." I look back at him with just as much severity.

"Kyle, I might never be okay again not the whole thing. I can't ever have that without Celery. But I am letting myself feel it everything that's there. The good and the bad and the so far beyond bad it's doesn't even seem possible. So don't worry about me okay?" He shakes his head, smiling ruefully.

"I've been worrying about you since the day you were born you're my little brother. The worrying about you, the wanting to watch out for you and fix everything that's wrong in your life it's automatic. I love you too much to ever stop worrying about you. But I'm glad I at least don't have to worry about losing you to that freaky dark place again. I know it hurts to be out here with us Care, but I'm glad you're here." In a truly shocking turn of events, I feel myself smile.

"Thanks Kyle." He tries not to beam at me too big, but fails.

I guess its cause this is probably the first time since Celery left that Kyle's seen me smile for real. It may actually be the first time period.

"Should I let you get back to your movie?" He asks after a couple seconds.

"Yeah, sure. See you later," He nods.

"Yeah, I'll be around some time in the evening. You want me to bring up supper?"

"That's alright," Concern crosses his face.

"You need to eat Carrots," I meet his eyes for one final serious look.

"I know, and I will. Just not today," I let mom feed me yesterday and I'm so used to eating nothing, I still feel full from it.

"I don't want you to get sick Carrots. You're looking really pale. You need food and maybe some fresh air. Why don't you go out on the balcony for awhile? Just like half an hour it'd really..." I tune him out, but smile a little inwardly as Kyle the concerned older brother teams up with Kyle the nurse in training.

"Kyle," I stop him eventually, mid ramble about my needing proper vitamins. He blinks and stays quiet. "I'm not hungry, but I'll eat something if you want."

"Don't do it for me," He protests quietly. I sigh.

"Right now, it has to be for you cause I don't care enough to do it for me. But I'll eat." Finally, he nods.

"Alright. I'll get you soup or something. Would you eat chocolate? You need protein," I find myself smiling for the second time that day.

"Sure bro. Whatever you want," he smiles happily and turns to leave.

"I'll be right back," he says over his shoulder.

"Kyle, I didn't mean I'd eat now!" I call after him. He takes a step back into the room. I shrug my eyes at him, "Give me a couple hours yeah?" It puts a damper on his enthusiasm, but eventually Kyle agrees.

"Okay," He smiles tightly, "good luck with the rest of the movie."

"Thanks."

I'm definitely going to need it.

Kyle returns later as promised, bearing food which I take without comment and begin eating. He stays leaned up against the wall, watching me.

"How're you feeling?" He asks eventually.

I think about this with my head tilted back and chewing my lip, until I eventually come up with, "Better." Kyle raises his eye brows.

"Really?" His tone hasn't quite reached hopeful, but that's what it wants to be.

"Well I mean, I'm not okay, and I wouldn't even go as far as to say I'm `fine', but yeah better. I mean come on, I made it through the entire movie without throwing myself the pity party of the century, and I didn't cry the WHOLE time. I even laughed a few times without starting to cry! So I think that's pretty encouraging." He smiles sadly.

"Yeah, I guess so. I'm glad." I shrug.

"You want to know the real sign that I'm starting to feel a little bit more like myself?" He nods.

"Definitely," I sigh.

"I'm starting to worry about Celery," Kyle carefully keeps his reaction to this hidden, and I continue, "For the longest time, I couldn't even stand to think of him not just cause of how much it hurt because of the anger

to. I've been and okay, AM SO mad at him. But now, with all the letting myself feel that's been going down, I really am feeling all of it, which happens to include a lot of worry for him. I know he was the one who did the leaving, but to have felt that he had to it must have been awful for him." Kyle walks over to me, and I lean into him readily.

"Have you talked to him at all, you know, since...?" Kyle shakes his head.

"No. None of us have." I move away from him, and look Kyle in the eye.

"I want you to, all of you," I shrug sadly. "I don't want him to feel alone."

Kyle looks surprised, but also not.

"Okay."

I can't say anything more about it, cause I'm pretty sure my voice wouldn't let me without cracking and eventually dissolving into tears, but I do nod. Maybe it's some of the loss and confusion inside me showing on my face that makes Kyle ask,

"Are you really sure you're, um... better?" I sigh.

"Being without Celery is beyond the pale."

"What does that mean?" He asks hesitantly, voice hushed.

"Nothing, or at least not what it might mean to anyone else. To me, it's hurting more than there could ever be words to express. I've just gotten tired of saying that to describe how I feel, even to myself. So I made something up." Kyle closes his eyes, like it hurts too much to look, and then takes my head in his hands, kisses my forehead.

"You're beautiful."

I smile the smile of the infinite sad.

"So are you."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty-Two
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sun, 22 Aug 2004 18:57:56 -0600

I wake up on the seventh day, after I've spent a week in my room, having made it my own little universe of misery and emotional wreckage, and it's that first moment that I'm fully conscious again, that I finally know. I know what I feel and I know what I have to do about it.

In that spirit, I get up and march into Kyle's room. He's asleep in his bed and I cough loudly. No response. I cough again. He stirs, but then just turns onto his side.

I sigh, and then shout, "KYLE!"

He jerks awake, wide eyed and mildly bewildered.

"Carrots?" He forces himself into a sitting position, still half asleep but trying to be supportive big brother guy, assuming I'm here because I'm having some kind of crisis.

"Kyle?"

"What?" He answers gently.

"We gotta go on a road trip."

"What?" More awake and confusion pushing away most of the gentleness.

"Seriously. There's nothing else for it. Start packing while I go to go buy some food for the road."

"What?!"

"Calgary. We have to go to Calgary and beat some sense into Celery."

It's the longest most confused pause in the history of long confused pauses.

Then Kyle nods.

"Alright."

I pause a moment in his doorway, thinking. "Do you think the Le Baron will make it all the way to Calgary?"

He shrugs. "It's never failed me in the past."

I nod. "That's what I thought. I'm going to HARRY's. Anything specific you want me to get?"

Kyle stares for awhile, but I'm guessing it's just taking him a little while to get his mind around the idea that all this is actually happening. I can relate.

"It'll take us like 20 hours."

I shrug. "Can't think of anyone I'd rather spend the time with." Which is sort of a quote from Boy Meets World I inform you helpfully.

He laughs soundlessly. "Jonas will kill us if we don't take him along of course."

I shrug again. "Of course."

"I'll call him."

"You do that."

I can only assume he did indeed do just that, because when I come back with bags of chips and granola bars and bottled juice, Jonas is sitting on Kyle's living room floor with his eyes closed and legs crossed muttering about Vasskez insanity as my beloved older brother wanders around snatching articles of clothing from here there and everywhere and rolling them up before shoving them into his duffle bag.

"Hey." I say, putting the bags down and pausing to toss Kyle the pair of socks I notice lying on the floor at my feet.

"Thanks," He mutters, his brow knitted. "Jo, do you know where my grey sweater is? The ribbed one with the V-neck?"

Jonas looks mildly insulted. "I'm not your mother -- what do I know about where your clothes are?"

Kyle forces a look of infinite patience onto his face. "Cause every time you come over you steal it?"

Jonas gives this a moments consideration, and then nods. "Right you are. It's on your record player."

Kyle disappears into his bedroom and returns with the sweater in question.

"I have no time to come up with a snappy comment about your resemblance to anyone's mother, but consider it heavily implied eh Jo?"

Jonas rolls his eyes and rises to his feet. "Yes. In fact, let's all take a moment to remember our mothers, shall we? As in, our mothers who in no way are going to allow us to suddenly up and go to Calgary in the middle of May, with our graduation and final exams rapidly approaching?"

"You don't think we'll be able to talk mom around?" I consult Kyle, the only one this doesn't actually apply to.

He shrugs. "I think we should ask dad first. You come up with some logic so we can appeal to him with it. And then mom will agree just cause of like, you being her beloved son and with the not wanting you to be miserable."

I feel he's broken down the situation exceptionally well.

"That's brilliant Kyle, but what about those of us who don't happen to have such reasonable parents?"

Kyle is all about the shrugging. "I want you to come along, I think we need you for this one, but you're right. In no way are your parents going to be down for this escapade. I'd happily see you say 'fuck you mom and dad' and come anyway, but I'm trying very hard to understand that that's not an overly attractive option for you. But basically, it's a choice you need to make."

"I hate everything," Jonas mutters petulantly and kicks the couch.

Kyle smiles kinda worriedly and pulls him into a make shift hug. "C'mon goldie... it's a rescue mission. Giving a big 'shove off' to the idea of all of us being fragmented. I want you to come back too. I need you back."

"I haven't been anywhere," Jonas protests, burrowing a little deeper into Kyle's hold. He says it like he knows it isn't true.

"Come back to me," Kyle whispers into his neck, obviously forgetting about his plan to let Jonas decide things on his own.

Jonas makes a sad sound and Kyle kisses the top of his head.

I'm about to make a stealthy exit when they break reluctantly apart.

Jonas kicks Kyle sharply in the shin.

"That was a rotten trick you big lumberjack."

"Are you coming?"

Jonas rolls his shoulders a couple times to relieve some tension.

"Course I am, berk."

Kyle flashes the ceiling a grin, and then returns his face to Jonas, mock innocent. Like we all didn't just see him do that.

"Good." He takes a breath and gets into action-guy mode. "Now here's what I think we should do. We should just pack up and get everything ready, Jonas, there's no way your parents are going to say yes, so don't ask, just leave them a note or phone message or something telling you where you've gone, and that you're safe. The `fuck you' part is totally up to your discretion. Care, mom and dad are both at work yeah? So we just stop by the bakery before we go. That way they see we're serious and everything, plus, quick get away."

"The twins are home right?"

"Somewhere I think, sure."

"We should tell them before we go." I've incurred enough of their wrath lately, I'm not looking to add to that.

Kyle considers this. "Yeah, we should. Even though they'll instantly want to come and may very well stow away somehow. Which they absolutely cannot do -- mom would stand in front of the car if we even attempted it with Jon and Dave along for the ride."

"Right."

"So we should go find them?"

"Indeed."

Jonas, who has been watching these interactions with mild disbelief, follows us silently.

We find the twins, not surprisingly, in their room. They're lying on Dave's bed, foreheads pressed together, talking in low voices. They both look pretty upset.

"Hey bros." I say, a touch awkwardly.

They look up.

"You guys okay?" Cause they're looking like they're not in a big way.

"We're fine," Jon answers shortly as they start sitting up.

I can't help notice how close they're continuing to sit, the way Dave is leaning into Jon slightly. I share a look with Kyle. Definitely not fine.

"I know I'm not the poster child for sharing with the family lately, but if you guys are in trouble or something, I want to help." I wish my credibility wasn't quite so non-existent. Not that I have anyone but myself to blame.

"It's nothing you need to worry about. We're just trying to figure something out and it's got us a little spun." Jon again.

Dave has closed his eyes, and his head has fallen onto Jon's shoulder.

"Dave?" Kyle is approaching the bed, looking at him anxiously.

"What? He's telling the truth." Dave defends, snapping out of his lassitude.

"No one's dying, no one's impregnated. It's just something with Braden, nothing any of you need to know about." Jon makes their `no comment' position infinitely clear.

Jonas, who hasn't said anything or really even made a change in facial expression since we came in here just sniffs and crosses his arms.

"Do you know something?" Kyle demands.

Jonas flutters his eye lashes innocently.

"What would I know?"

The twins reveal nothing.

"Look, there had to be a reason you all came in here other than to interrogate us. What's wrong now?" Jon asks darkly.

Dave kicks him, causing Jon to smile slightly.

They're bizarre behavior renders me lost for words.

"We're going to Calgary. To... `see' Celery." Kyle supplies.

That gets their attention.

"We're coming."

"You can't. Look, seriously. We want to do it right, but you know mom and dad will never go for it." I say earnestly.

"They won't let us go either probably, if we suggest it even." Kyle adds.

"Please don't try to hide in the trunk." Jonas has the last word.

"Okay?" When they don't respond.

They look at each other, and sigh in tandem. Then, in unison, "Hoosha."

"What?"

"We're twins! We can't use words to communicate no one else understands every once in awhile?" Dave grumbles.

"By all means. Does hoosha in anyway mean -- we promise to not stow away and will hold down the fort while you dudes are away?"

"In this case, yes."

"Okay then."

We actually somehow manage to merit hugs good bye. Grudgingly given, but given none the less. And Jonas even gets a smile. I'm beginning to suspect my brothers don't really like me, but tell myself I'll have to worry about that later. Which, come to think of it, may be the reason.

We stop by Jonas's house so he can leave the short note he dashed off and need to be hugged rather bracingly following it's completion, and I've worked up a good sense of dread by the time we pull into the employees only spot behind the bakery. However, as soon as we step through the door I know they know, which leads to shock, which is distracting.

Mom clucks at me as she wipes her hands on her apron, ridding herself of excess flour.

"What -- am I not your mother? I've been around kiddo." She hugs me then, and it's more comforting that things you can't have every second of your life should be allowed to be.

"You I suppose knew even before her?" Retreating as always into feeble joking once I've been released for the hug and am facing my dad.

He raises his eye brows and `hmms' innocuously.

I forgo smart ass remarks and just hug him instead. This is something I've done it so rarely in my life it really should feel awkward, but somehow it

doesn't.

Kyle is drawn aside briefly to receive the standard lecture about safety and looking out for us and calling regularly, and then miraculously we're back out the doors.

Jonas, who stayed in the car for a multitude of reasons, is unable or disinclined to hide the look of disbelief marred with jealousy upon seeing us emerge with `parentally endorsed road trip' smiles.

We feel he's entitled to these emotions, so we don't say anything, although our smiles slip from our faces and Kyle momentarily squeezes his hand once back in the drivers seat.

On the road once we've reached the city limits and still nothing has been said, Jonas takes it upon himself to say,

"So, this is like -- crazy. We all know that right?"

"Sure." Kyle.

"And everybody's cool with that?"

"Pretty much, yeah." Me.

"There is no plan, there is no acknowledged purpose -- no IDEA even, of WHY exactly we're even going."

"You've nailed it Jonas, bravo." Kyle.

"Ga! One of you has to snap out of this and explain how the hell that can be possible! Carrots you can't just... I mean you must know--"

"No, Jonas, I don't. And I can't. If I start thinking about why I need to do this and all the reasons why I should and shouldn't I'll never actually do it. And I HAVE to do it."

"You're just not going to let yourself think about why."

"That's right."

"Terrific."

"I think you'll find that it is."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty-Three
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sun, 19 Sep 2004 21:26:56 -0600

After we roll into town we do the easy stuff first. Check into the hotel Kyle booked back near the Saskatchewan Alberta boarder, consult a city map to find Their address, stretch our legs and generally revel in finally being out of the car for awhile.

Back in the Le Baron after nearly an hour of dozing on our beds tension starts to crackle inside of me. I completely drop all the out of my ass rambling I kept up most of the trip to stay sane, and try to ignore the looks of growing concern Kyle and Jonas throw me.

"We're almost there, you know." Kyle mentions softly when it's true.

"I know."

"How you feeling?"

"It's difficult to say."

"Your friends are with you Aragorn." Jonas says reassuringly.

It makes me smile, and that's enough.

"Let's hope they last the night."

Pulling up to the house, I'm rocketed back to full nervous and I take a few minutes collecting myself and attempting to amass some inner strength before getting out of the car and approaching what I've determined to be Celery's house according to the address he gave me. This proves to have been a wise move on my part, as I am confronted with Debbie when I finally make it to the door. More surprising than that is the baby she is cradling in her arms in a vague semblance of maternity. It seems out of place on her. I'm actually comforted when the look of lazily contained disgust crosses her face upon recognition of me.

"Is Celery home?" I see no point exchanging greetings or attempts at pleasantries.

The look of disgust diminishes in favour of one I warily describe as malicious glee. "Celery," disgust returning full power in voice and look as she speaks the name, "Doesn't live here anymore."

I stand there stunned, my brain frantically trying to make sense of her words, and fail to notice the door has been shut in my face until it opens

again. It's not Debbie who reopened the door I discover, but one of the steps, who regards me passive disinterest.

"He lives with the freaky geek Greenberg now, its three houses that way." Vague gesture to the left.

Again, my utter shock and confusion allows me no ability to reply and for a second time the door is shut firmly. Somehow I manage to stumble back to the car where Jonas and Kyle have no doubt been looking anxiously on.

"What's going on? He wasn't home?" Kyle's voice warring between gentleness and urgency.

I shake my head slowly, taking time to allow the concept to settle in.

"Well did they say where he was?" Jonas demands, worry edging in as a result of my prolonged silence.

"He moved out," By some miracle, I'm actually able to say that. I believe that is the miracle of detachment. "He lives with Saul now."

"What?!" Both of them. The exact same way.

"Yeah."

"Carrots," Kyle's voice is like a plea, begging me not to give in to this news and let it burry me.

I hold up a hand. "It's okay. I mean, at this point... coming this far," I shrug. "I just need to see him. I'll see him and then maybe I'll be able to make sense of some of what I'm feeling and understand this shit a little better. Until then I'm pretty much on auto pilot."

"We noticed that," Jonas remarks.

I figure they deserve an apologetic smile. And a little extra something for Kyle, "Sorry about all the rounds of Sexual Innuendo Ahoy! bro. I know that was probably scarring."

Kyle affects a brave face, hiding his noble suffering. "It's okay."

"Good."

"You're still going then?" Jonas asks.

I nod. "Yeah, one of the steps told me where it is. Which was... weird, but there you go. It's just on this same street, but guys..."

"You want to go alone?" Kyle sounds grave, but unsurprised.

This part of the plan was never really discussed, but I think they always hoped we'd be able to make it a team effort.

"Yeah."

Kyle makes the rest of the decision, "Jo, you and I should just go back to the hotel, that way Carrots, you can just take all the time you need, and then call a cab back," He pauses, hand searching his pocket, "Here's some cash for that."

"Take as long as you need eh?" Jonas adds as I reach to take the money from Kyle.

I nod and share one look of solidarity with them before taking a deep breath and getting out of the car.

Getting from the Le Baron to Saul's house is the longest walk I've ever taken. And when I ring the doorbell the second it takes for the door to open lasts longer than my whole life has felt.

Despite that, it seems very sudden at the same time -- all too sudden in fact -- to be facing a dark haired boy with huge watery green eyes in corduroys and an over-large t-shirt I hate recognizing as Celery's. I know that this can be no one but Saul and somehow despite the fact that I know this is his house, it takes me a minute to recover from that. I was so prepared for Celery to open that door. And the fact that Saul's wearing Celery's clothes and staring at me with tired but totally unruffled eyes is not helping me with my calmness issues.

"Are you Paul?" His voice is tired scratchy and too deep for the harmless 13-year-old I convinced myself he was in my head.

"Paul?" What? You expected an intelligent response at a time like this?

"New guy at work? But then, if you were Paul, you'd already know about yourself. So Not Paul, what can I do for you today?"

I blink.

"Why are you here?" He tries again, not unkindly. "What do you need?"

"Celery." I eventually and miraculously force out.

This, though it didn't sound that impressive to the common observer, has certainly blown Saul away. He keeps raising his eyebrows and opening his mouth in an attempt to speak, but this is causing Saul great visible

difficulty. He shakes his head a few times, slowly raising his head to look at me.

"Are you," He swallows, "Carrots?" My name is spoken in some sort of bewildered awe, like I'm famous, but also fear and uncertainty.

I nod, now mildly curious about what his reaction will be.

"Hot damn."

I'm shocked to find myself wanting to smirk and roll my eyes. I'm in no mood to deny myself right now, so that's just what I do.

"Can I talk to him please?" Nothing like a good eye roll to get me feeling like my old self. At least enough to form sentences, anyway.

There's an automatic involuntary looking flash of reluctance, but his face suggests he's aware that it's hard for me to have to ask this of him.

"Yes, of course you can -- his room's just "

Explaining this suddenly becomes superfluous because Celery has emerged from a nearby door.

He's holding a magazine in his hand, and appears to be reading it intently. Saul makes a desperate coughing noise and Celery's eyes jerk away from what he was reading and latch immediately onto me, widening into comical proportions with surprise.

The colour literally drains from his face. He takes a stumbling step backwards into a nearby wall and just stays there, ashen faced and blinking at me like I'm the living dead.

In what appears to be an exercise in supreme self restraint on Saul's part, he says nothing to Celery and limits himself to a brief squeeze of Celery's hand before he darts up the stairs, out of sight.

This is how things progressed into me standing in the doorway and Celery standing half a meter away and both of us staring, wordless and white lipped from biting down on them so hard. He makes a sound almost like my name and I can't stop my feet from taking the step that leads me crashing into his arms anymore than I can stop the sob in my throat or the tears in my eyes when his arms rise from his sides to wrap themselves around me.

We're together like that for a length of time I'm lost to calculate as I pound out my frustration and grief, a fist against his chest. I'm calm for a moment then, in his arms, once I've exhausted my anger, but this is a moment I can tell you quite confidently lasted barely a second before, hating how good it feels, I push him violently away and shut my eyes to the

beauty of him that would make me forget and forgive anything and wrap my arms around myself.

Just as I expected but should have feared, now that I'm here, I know exactly why. And I hate it.

"Is this what you wanted?" I sob out the question. "Is this why you left -- to see if I would come after you? To see if you could push me this far away and still have me follow you?" All this, suddenly pouring out of me, everything I couldn't let myself think about the whole 20 hours on the way over here and the ones in between my deciding this was something I had to do and us getting in the car.

The accusation hangs in the air but Celery's shocked and horrified look is enough to convince me it isn't true. I notice in a tired resigned sort of way that it doesn't really make this better.

"Then why?" The desperate teary croak in my voice, "I know all the things you said were real I know that it's not just you... but what I don't know and can't understand is why you were able to actually leave when I couldn't stay away even while I was trying so hard to hate you."

"Because you're different than me." He says, surprising me with the promptness and finality of his response. "You haven't learned how to take your pain and run with it quite the way I have. Because growing up in a real family teaches you how to deal and growing up in one like mine only teaches you how to duck? I don't know Carrots -- maybe because you're just a better person than me. Does it even matter?" He sounds so tired, and looks so worn.

"Of course it matters!"

He shakes his head. "Is there anything? Anything I could say, any reason I could give that would make it better? Make it hurt less? Change ANYTHING?"

And of course it's only after he says it that I realize the answer is no. It's something my silence answers for me.

The sigh that comes holds in it not even an ounce of self-pity, which I know because hearing it doesn't make me want to pummel him repeatedly.

"What do you want me to say? I was a selfish bastard. I knew what my leaving would do to you and I did it anyway. I promised you I wouldn't leave and I DID IT ANYWAY. I'd love to say I had some nobler purpose in mind, that I was acting out of concern for you or our relationship, but that's a lie I couldn't stand to say any more than you to hear. And I can't even apologize, because I don't feel I deserve to ask for your

forgiveness. But saying that, at least know for all that it was and the ways that it hurt you -- you have to know that it wasn't a calculated thing. There was no plan, no pre-meditation. It's just done... and I don't know how to make it better. Not what's been happening now or the stuff before it. This run away strategy of mine -- shockingly enough -- really isn't working so far."

"This is me, so buried in sarcastic remarks and biting retorts I can't even pick one out of the din to say to you."

It's mildly alarming and vaguely infuriating when he smiles and shakes his head.

"I love you Carrots."

I laugh, cause recently hearing him say that has started to seem like the funniest joke. Made all the more funny, of course, by my reply which is, "I love you too Celery."

It's time for resigned embracing and resisting the urge to step on his toes.

"You're such a bastard," I say, half because I love the muffled way my words sound when I'm talking into his chest.

"Literally!" Celery shouts.

I'm not entirely sure why, but I've always found the unnecessary shouting of "literally!" damn funny. Celery knows and agrees, and that is how we end up laughing hysterically, clinging to each other so we don't fall over. This of course, eventually results in both of us crashing to the ground in a heap.

At which point my peasant friend who looks just like me arrives and we make a switch. And by that I mean, it's in that moment that Saul appears from the stairway. I notice belatedly that he's disturbingly and unexpectedly beautiful.

"What's up?" Celery asks from his position beneath me on the floor.

Saul answers, unfazed,

"The guys called, wondering where we were. And so did Paul, apologizing for being late picking us up. I told him not to worry about it since you weren't going to be able to make it anyway."

Celery looks massively relieved. "Thanks man." His voice is so warm. My heart screams.

Saul flashes him a small smile. "I live to serve." He jokes casually.

Half of Celery's mouth actually turns up into a smile, making me hate him. Saul that is. Well actually, maybe both of them.

"I am planning to go over there though. Even without my brightest star," Celery rolls his eyes, "I can still get some good filming done. Anyway, they all want to know what's going on."

Celery's face clouds. Saul smiles reprovably, like he feels underestimated.

"I'll compose some solid lies on the bus. The actual and difficult truth I'll happily leave to you."

Celery laughs weakly. "You're too kind."

"Dude, you know you love me."

It's so offhand, so teasing, and that's exactly why it hurts. Because it speaks of familiarity and camaraderie. I don't understand how Celery avoided killing Colin.

Celery'd already noticed the look on my face, and Saul is hot on his heels. He coughs awkwardly.

"Am I still here? What's that about? Definitely time to hit the old dusty trail."

Except he's not leaving. Celery's hand in on his shoulder (again!), and suddenly Saul looks like he's ready to do nothing less.

Saul looks up at Celery carefully. "Are you okay?"

Celery laughs hollowly. "There's no time."

"Got it. Later though eh? I'd really like to talk to both of you."

Celery glances hopefully in my direction (I'm still on the damn floor), but that's too far off. I can't even think about it.

Perhaps sensing this, Saul abruptly switches topics, waving the cell phone in his hand at Celery. "Is it okay if I take this?" Celery nods. "I'm just a ring away." Firmly.

Celery's mouth turns up in a half smile. "I'll be okay."

They share a silent battle with their eyes. Saul looks away first, but his eyes fall on me, and he seems to instantly regain his confidence.

"Look, I know I've got enemy stamped on my forehead right now and that you probably don't think I have any place in this, but this is the guy who saves me from routine pummeling at our local high school. This is the guy who listens to me rant about math and then consistently resists the urge to make fun of me afterwards. This is the guy who refuses to let my mom shovel or carry in the groceries or even BUY them half the time. This is my brother and my friend. Could you please try not to fuck him up anymore than he already is?"

"Saul." Celery reprimands weakly.

Saul effectively explodes. "Damnit John! Stop taking the blame for everything all the time! It's not helping anyone."

It's exactly like my blood has turned to ice and a small bomb has gone off inside me at the same time. And I have to wonder, what happened to all the air in this room? I distinctly remember there being plenty a second ago.

"John?" I echo. My voice some how escaping the shock that has rendered the rest of me immobile.

"Oh shit," Saul covers his eyes with a hand.

Celery just stands there, looking desolate and resigned, like things have gotten so bad he's not even going to try damage control anymore.

"Saul," He eventually forces out.

"Gone." And then he is.

But once gone, Saul's presence is felt all the louder in the silence between us, my narrowed eyes and the echo of a name I almost forgot.

"Is that who you are now?" I ask, less coldly than I first thought it.

The audible swallow and pained look that answer me back causes my fists to clench and the last part of my heart that was struggling to remain intact to break in half before shriveling into nothing. (You gotta appreciate the way I'm still providing the imagery despite all that, don't ya?)

I turn away from him and walk into the room he came out of not so long ago. I was in Celery's room in Winnipeg so rarely I have no expectations, nothing I can look for to see if Celery lives here anymore. The bed isn't made and the floor is littered with skateboard magazines, videos and cds. There are no posters on the walls, it's all just bare. There are several

broken skate decks leaning up against one wall, alongside his current one. I sit down on the rumpled bed and stare at the picture of my 16-year-old self beaming at the 16-year-old Celery that sits on his bedside table. It shares a place with a broken looking clock and an ugly lamp. Celery is standing in the doorway watching me as I search my surroundings for a sign of the boy in that picture.

"Did we know what we were doing?" I wonder aloud, staring again into our happy faces on that day we dared the world to suggest we'd ever be anything but together.

"Do you feel differently than you did then?" Damn the whole concept of answering a question with a question. Damn it to hell. Damn the calmness in his voice too.

I keep getting stuck in conversations I don't want to be having. And in no way is he helping by sounding once again like we're talking about a ham sandwich.

"Now is not the time for your trademark stoicism!" Which I can barely care enough to bother telling you is a reverse Buffy quote.

"I said everything I knew about what I was feeling before I left. I thought you were here because you didn't."

Right. It's that easy.

I'm going to do more than kick him in a minute. Just you wait.

"I am finding it incredible that you can act like you don't care." Which is unfair enough of me to say that he calls me on it.

"Fuck you Carrots," people seem to find saying that extremely satisfying lately. "Of course I care. That was actually supposed to be the point."

"I thought you weren't going to pretend you left for noble reasons?" Inwardly I praise myself for turning my hurt into anger and not tears. Who's the man now?

"There's nothing noble going on anywhere, and I meant right now. How there's nothing I can say anyway, so I might as well not even try but you deserve to get your rage on?"

"So this is a martyr thing?" Just keeping up the good work.

He laughs. Yay for the bitterness. "For I am the King of Emotional Martyr's -- may all lesser Emotional Martyr's bow before me." He proclaims this while sweeping his arms and puffing up his chest.

I'm tempted to laugh. Or possibly smack him. In the end, all I can do is sigh and look around the room. "You moved out," I shake my head. "You moved out and you didn't even tell me. When did things get that bad, what happened?"

Slowly, he comes over to sit by me on the bed. "It was always that bad. As you may recall, I used to spend 90% of my time at your house and still couldn't stand it. All Them all the time didn't go well. On my 18th I told Saul I was thinking of trying to find a place of my own and a couple hours later his mom was at the door with boxes and a rented van, ordering me to pack my things and informing me of my new address."

I am Jack's enflamed sense of rejection.

I try to speak, but fail rather spectacularly. Instead I just bore angry tear soaked eyes into his. There are so many ways this hurts I can't even form words.

"I got nothing." He suddenly informs me.

"What?" I croak like it's the first time I've spoken in 10 years.

"There's no justification for why I didn't tell you or why I'm living in the room that used to serve as Saul's mini evil scientist lab instead of with you. There's nothing Carrots -- don't you see? Nothing to make it better. Not any of it."

It takes me a long time, but I finally realize why.

"You're happy here." And the fact that this is true is naturally the worst and most surprising part. I can't seem to stop laughing in the face of the worst hurts these days.

"Yes." He replies (after several days).

"And I was starting to be really happy there," I can't quite bear to say, `without you'.

"Yes."

"You saw. You saw and..." I have to stop a minute cause I'm really not ready to cry yet. "You felt like I'm feeling now?" Like screaming and laughing and breaking everything, especially the sources of the happiness that are taking him away from me.

He nods.

"I can't believe you didn't cut Colin's heart out with a spoon." I'm generous enough to say this now that I feel like I'm going to kill Saul on sight. His mother too.

"It was touch and go there for awhile." He allows himself a small bitter smile.

As has rapidly become the pattern for my life, yet another heavy silence blankets the room and us with it. Feelings swim inside me, crinching at my heart and making my eyes burn and I reach out to take his hand but our fingers bump as he's moving to do the same and we both jerk away as if magnetically repelled. With this final truth out in the open, I'm sure I'm thinking `what happens now?' hard enough for him to hear it without my actually speaking. I can almost laugh at the way `where do we go from here' has fallen into my head, but feel that I might only be good for laughing to hold back rage or crying anymore, and instead hold it all in.

"We just have to," and then nothing, as if he has lost his nerve or thought or whatever.

"What?" So hopelessly hopeful.

"I'm having trouble making suggestions when I can't even achieve eye contact." It's an admission, not a shot.

"I don't want to be without you." For this he will meet my eyes so immediately and automatic. "Happy or not, I'd still take anything over being without you," and it's the first time where I actually and honestly don't know if he'll feel the same way.

"Even if you're better off?"

I shake my head. "Answered that already Cel -- I've said. With you I am better, always. This itself is in no way new. Long past first blush with this revelation. It's your turn now. Don't answer for me, just say what YOU actually feel, for once." I have to brace myself, even to be able to ask the question.

"Are you better off alone?"

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty-Four
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Wed, 06 Oct 2004 14:00:05 -0600

You wake up in Calgary. You're naked and slowly becoming aware of this fact, and that you can't quite remember why it's so.

Then it all comes crashing back.

My question that hung in the air until Celery was all I could see or taste or feel because his hands and mouth were everywhere, claiming me and surrendering all at once.

The clothes that were torn off with hurried frantic hands, our fingers stopping only to grip each other's hair to pull the other in for frenzied kisses.

The complete absence of words.

The strangeness of it, how it somehow managed to feel like our first and last time with every gesture and sigh.

Collapsing against each other, exhausted although it was still day.

Waking up to him now, oddly calm.

"How many times does something have to happen before it constitutes a pattern?" Another rhetorical question that only remains so if no one can come up with a satisfactory answer.

"And here I was thinking I answered your question so eloquently." He says this as he rolls onto his side against me and threads our fingers together. Having achieved this, he draws them up to his lips and kisses my strangely cold hands.

"If not that, at the very least it was a brilliant strategic move in the Great Avoidance Campaign."

I'm almost happy, allowing myself briefly to think that because we're currently basking in the afterglow things are okay again. Thus making close physical proximity and gently teasing tones appropriate.

Celery apparently is not quite ready to join me in the delusion, drawing away slightly and looking so seriously into my eyes. "I'll never be better off without you. I'll always need you."

And somehow, hearing it, everything seems that much worse again. Not

exactly the reaction to those words I expected. I sit up, attempting to add a `safe' distance between us.

"And yet..." Since we're being all about the reality again, let's all welcome the return of Carrots' feelings of anger and betrayal.

"And regardless." He nods in time to these heavily spoken words.

"You're a lying bastard." A fact, not an accusation.

"Yes."

"I should hate you." This point is less certain.

"Yes."

"I don't though."

"That's good to know."

Okay, you get one more.

"I'm considering pretending to for awhile though. I feel you deserve to grovel."

"Absolutely."

Enough of this. I sigh and drop the tranquil mask.

"Seriously, what the hell were you thinking?"

"Wasn't."

"You're like, Mr. Double Life -- I mean, what the fuck?"

"Lying bastard."

"Didn't you care about what learning these truths would do to me?"
Desperation in my voice, something he has to answer.

"Of course I did," his voice, for the first time, loses its breezy tone.

"So how could you do it?"

"I believe I mentioned earlier I had no justifications for my actions."

"That's it? That's all you're going to say to me? And if I tell you it isn't enough?"

"You've already said it was, or at least, that you were still willing to try to work things out."

"And you think that gives you a free ticket out of Blameville?" I literally cannot believe I'm hearing this. Living this.

"No... I don't know. I just know I can't undo it and I can't explain it and I recognize that any amount of begging for forgiveness isn't going to be remotely effective if you're not already going to be willing to grant that forgiveness. What I mean is, I'll give you time and let me tell you, there WILL be excessive amounts of heartfelt groveling, but I have to know that something will come of it, that at some point you WILL be ready to let things go."

I sigh heavily, looking at the recently acquired space between us. Remembering the easy closeness we shared only moments ago.

"It was so easy to forget all the ways things are so far from being okay." This mutterance is mostly for my own benefit.

"Too easy?" Softly, slowly.

"I can forgive you," addressing his earlier comments. "I can even almost recognize that's not even something that you feel you need, depending on how you're feeling about your leaving at this particular moment. But even if you do away with all that, there's still the great giant blinking WHAT NOW sign over our heads and all the ruins of what used to be our eternal and freaky bond at our feet. All the truths we neglected to tell that got us where we are today."

"You know all my secrets now. Is it too much?"

"I've answered that question -- hoped we both had. It's not that it's too much, it's not that we can't do it, that we give up... it's just going to be so hard. And I have no idea where to begin."

"I think it's safe to say it should begin with me groveling."

I almost want to laugh.

"Yeah."

"How do you feel about rhyming?"

"You're going to make your apologies and pleas for forgiveness rhyme?"

"I'm considering it."

This time, the urge is slightly stronger.

"Don't think I don't know your game." I warn him, but there's a trace of a smile on my voice.

Despite this, his face grows serious again. "I'll say it as many times as it takes -- but I hope you already know how sorry I am. How willing I am to do absolutely anything to make it up to you. How much I love you and always will. Contrary to what my behavior of late would indicate, I can't even begin to think about truly building a life in any way separate from you. Certainly not one I'll cherish and derive any true joy from."

Because I absolutely refuse to cry (and thus, indicate that I've already been won over), I make a crack instead. "Practiced that one in the mirror did we?"

He smiles, "Nope. Made a recording of it, played it back to myself every night as I fell asleep."

He's joking, and I have to admit, I'm rather amused.

Still, I have my hippo dignity. And also my hippo rage. It keeps me warm.

"I need you to make me believe its true Celery." Letting him know he hasn't yet.

"I'm going to." He promises, in away that let's me believe it could be true.

He brushes his hand against my knee,

"Just give me time."

I nod slowly. "I know there are things I have to do to. I know there are things we need to repair on both sides."

He sighs, nodding as well.

"It's a long, important process."

My eyes, which had been busy contemplating my hands, snap over to him, as I recognize those words as ones I've heard before.

"Trust has to be built back," I continue cautiously, not entirely sure he's saying what I think he is.

"On both sides," confirming he is.

The final line remains unsaid until Celery comes closer to me again, desperate longing and a muted plea showing through his eyes. I allow him to retrieve my hand.

"I know I don't have any right to ask, but I'm doing it anyway." He kisses my cheek, so reverently, so alive with pain. He's looking at me again, his eyes so close they're all I can see.

"Can we just skip it?"

"We c..." My voice breaks and I shut my eyes. When I open them again he's further away from me, but still so close, and still looking at me so intensely, so desperately hopeful. And I can't say no. Not to him, not about something like this, with him looking at me this way.

"It won't work," I say, trying anyway. "We can't just forget about it. Snap our fingers and suddenly it all goes away, doesn't matter anymore."

"Maybe not forever, but couldn't we just BE for awhile? Be together? Like we were supposed to? Get back the time we lost?"

I can only lock my jaw and hope when I finally dare to open it, a stream of nonsense passing for expletives doesn't pouring out.

He reaches over and brushes the jaw I'm clenching so tightly with his thumb.

"Just for a few days. I'll show you around, let you see all the parts of my world I didn't know how to tell you about. If you feel like pissing off at the end in a blaze of melodramatic self-pitying glory like I did, that'll be your right."

"Revenge is sweet meets Fantasy Camp?"

He shrugs. "Something like that, I guess."

I look away from him, and see if I can think about it rationally.

"Care "

I don't let him finish, "What happens? When the term ends? I have to go back eventually."

"We'll just deal with it when the time comes. I just, this is the most we've talked and actually gotten things out in the open since... it's the closest I've felt to you in such a long time. I don't want to lose it yet."

"Why do we have to lose it at all?"

He shrugs. "Maybe we don't. I don't know. I'd kind of like to find out though."

I search his eyes, hoping they'll tell me all his secrets like they used to, but there's nothing there. No hidden agenda or deceit. Just the smallest glimmer of hope.

"You really think it'll make things better?"

He laughs sadly. "I don't really see how it could make them any worse."

I can see why he laughed. It's a pretty funny joke. And it's on both of us.

"What about Kyle and Jonas?" My last attempt at logical reasoning.

"What about them?" Confused.

"They can't be expected to hang around,"

"They're here?" So much is hiding in those words. Shock, gratitude, fear, hope.

"Yeah. Did I forget to mention that?"

"Pretty much."

"Sorry."

"S'alright. You had other things on your mind."

"Yeah, about him." Pointedly.

Celery shrugs.

"When we got here, well, you know most of it. I didn't really speak to anyone, or acknowledge anything. I just sort of zombied my way through my days, except when I was talking or writing to you. As I slowly started to regain a bit of my coherence, I noticed that when teachers spoke to me, they called me John. The first time it happened, my mind was a total blank. I honestly couldn't figure out what the hell they were playing at. Then, after a second, it dawned on me -- like, oh yeah, that's me. Sort of. It was ridiculous, but in that moment, I honestly felt like I was five years old again. Aware of myself only as this little boy who didn't have anyone. I remembered of course, that I stopped being that boy a long time

ago, but in that moment, it just seemed to fit. In Winnipeg, with you, I was loved, I had a family and friends... and that's Celery. John never had those things, so it made perfect sense to become John again when I lost them." At the flash in my eyes he amends, "Felt like I had lost them." He shakes his head, sighing. "But I didn't PLAN it Care. It wasn't like I introduced myself to people that way," he sighs again. "Not at first. It just caught on. By the time I was starting to speak to people, everyone had heard some teacher call me John at least once and it was so much easier to just let it slide, that way nobody asked me questions and I didn't have to explain. It was the perfect way to keep everyone at arms length."

"You keep Saul at arms length? I can't help but notice you're living in his house," I have to pause to work some of the disgust out of my system before continuing, "That he wears your clothes."

Celery flinches, but meets my eyes.

"He's my friend. The best one I've got here. Everything I've told you about him is true. He's a Science Fiction geek and all around genius. He's very recently 15 and he's an only child. I used to think he was a lot like me, shy, slightly too interested in math, but then I got to know him a little better. Really he's extremely confident in himself and not shy at all, just quiet. In the time I've known him he's grown 6 inches and he's only starting to rebuild his dress shirt and cardigans wardrobe. They're too big for him but I force him to wear my clothes because it's the only way I can attempt to help out around here. I pretend to accidentally buy stuff too small and give him that too, but can't very often, cause if I try he won't let me get away with it. He loves to snowboard for completely non-trendy reasons. Because of the new clothes and growth spurt and everything, lately he's starting to be considered a 'cool geek', which he doesn't like, so randomly he does extremely geeky things like giving people the Vulcan 'live long and prosper' sign or having an argument with someone about math."

"And he calls you John."

Celery sighs heavily, and nods. "And he calls me John."

"He knows though, that that's not all you are. When I asked for you at the door you'd have thought I was asking him to sacrifice his first born."

There's an almost smile on his face, and he nods. "He knows. Right around the time I first blocked a punch meant for him, he started chipping away at the lovely walls I'd built up around myself. And he's persistent and yes, much smarter than me. Some of it I told him, some he just figured out on his own. The tattoo is less than subtle."

"I've never really been a fan of subtly."

"I know."

"The guys'?" Thinking, let's finish this. Let's get it all out there.

"Denny, Jake and Kory. Jake's a girl, by the way. They're friends from work. Sometimes we went snowboarding together in the winter and now that it's warm enough, on days we have off we all go skating. Not always the whole crew, but as many as can."

"Saul said something about filming?"

"Yeah, he's really awesome at it. Doesn't do any skating himself, but he enjoys the challenge of capturing it well on camera. He usually comes with us when we go. He's a total phenome at it."

"Is there anything he can't do?" That right there, is some quality bitterness. You don't hear bitterness like that everyday, I'm telling you.

"Well he hasn't yet managed to transfigure himself into you so I'll feel anything more for him than friendship." There's a touch of almost every inflection you could imagine in it. Promise, anger, pleading, firmness, mocking.

"You understand that I hate him anyway right?"

Let him just see what I do to him if he says no.

"Only too well."

"You didn't tell me any of it. How horrible things were, the ways they were starting to be really great. There's this huge part of your life you just glossed over."

"And that's in no way what you did."

"It's exactly what I did!" I sigh. "I didn't mean to sound all judgy, I was just, you know... stating my awe at our ability to miss-communicate ourselves into yet new heights of fucked-uped-ness."

"Lately it has become our forte." He acknowledges.

"Yay us, we kill relationships the best."

"Go us."

Being in bed with him suddenly feels much too close, too dangerous.

"I love you I forgive you but I don't... TRUST you. Not the way I used to and I hate that means things'll never be the same."

"We don't really have to skip it -- the trust being built back part. I know that has to happen."

"Do you happen to also know how that'll be able to happen?" My tone is actually hopeful.

He shakes his head somewhat ruefully. "No, sorry."

"I think it's a time thing." I say with a sigh. "You do things -- WE do things -- that'll just slowly show each other we... that we still..."

"That forever still means forever?"

"Yeah."

"It does Carrots," He vows. "It always will."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty-Five
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sat, 23 Oct 2004 16:50:56 -0600

We talk in circles for a few hours more, until I realize somewhere along the way I've agreed to stay for a week and decide Jonas and Kyle have languished in the dark long enough. Celery, for his part, is excited and terrified about seeing them. Just the same, he gives me space to do what I want, leaving the room as I call. Kyle answers.

"How's it going?" He asks cautiously.

"Fantastically." Oh sarcasm, my dear, dear friend.

"Are you okay?"

"I think..." I sigh. "Maybe. But, yeah, the reason I'm calling is cause he wants to see you and Jonas -- do you think you could come over?"

"Sure, of course! You're alright with...?"

"Yeah. I mean, obviously. I know he's not... I'm not the only one he matters to."

"We'll be right over yeah?"

"Okay."

"I love you bro, stay strong."

I almost smile at that.

"Bye Kyle."

Celery returns shortly after the call ends and we sit in silence until Jonas and Kyle arrive. In a miraculously inspired moment, he suggests I go out and talk to them by myself first.

"Thanks." Grateful to a ridiculous extent to have been granted an opportunity to collect myself and regroup slightly.

Kyle hugs me as soon as he exits the Le Baron and though I wasn't expecting it, I realize it's exactly what I needed. Jonas hangs back and simply smiles encouragingly. It's enough.

"We love you Carrots." Jonas tells me, like he's raising their banner in my defense.

I tilt my head no. "I don't want this to be a gang up. What he's done to me... what we've done to each other... I can take care of myself is all. I want this to be... I just want things to be okay for a little while."

They smile.

"Ready to go back in?" Kyle asks, leaving the rest unsaid.

I nod.

Celery is hovering in his doorway and there's a lot of meaningful eye contact avoidance going on for the first couple minutes when we get inside. Then Kyle approaches Celery and pulls him into a hard, fiercely angry hug.

"Never pull that shit again, hear me? You think just cause things with you and him are going wrong that means we don't love you anymore? That we don't care and worry and all of that? Huh?" He jabs Celery a little.

"He's not the only one who's loved you since you were fucking six years old. You're my little brother."

Celery pulls Kyle back into a closer hug at this and I love them both perfectly in this moment.

Jonas and Celery's coming together is slightly different. When Kyle finally let's go Jonas approaches Celery slowly, knowing it's his turn. They bite lips and stare at each other but before Jonas can find what he's looking for or decide what to say Celery sees something else in Jonas and initiates a protective hug.

"I'm sorry," He whispers, in a way that makes me certain he's not talking about us.

Jonas laughs hollowly. "Yeah well. Me too. But there's nothing either of us can do about it."

Celery nods, and Kyle and I share a look of utter confusion.

"Jo?" Kyle finally inquires meekly.

"It's okay Kyle," Jonas responds automatically. "It's nothing you don't know about."

This seems to clue him in, leaving me alone in the dark.

"You guys want some time?" Kyle's question of Jonas and Celery surprises me, but they nod.

Celery has an arm around Jonas's shoulders as they start to turn away from us. Celery stops to glance back at Kyle and ask, "Are we okay man?" Kyle nods and Celery smiles a little. "Okay." That's all and seconds later they're both gone behind his door.

I look at Kyle blankly and he nods his head at the front door. We exit the house and sit down on the concrete steps. I want to ask him what's going on with Jonas, but I have no idea how. Silence reigns for a very long time.

"I forgot about that." Kyle murmurs eventually.

"What?"

"Them -- the way they are with each other. The way they protect and understand each other in a way neither of us get. The way he belonged to Celery first."

I simply nod, and we're quiet again.

"What do you think they're talking about?" I ask after a time.

"Well, I don't want to go all egotistical and say they're talking about us..."

"Oh they're SO talking about us."

Kyle smirks, taking heed of my tone. "He nailed you on the equal opportunity secrecy thing didn't he?"

"Busted cold."

He chuckles humorlessly. "I'm here to tell you Carrots, I'm impressed." Kyle says, shaking his head. "Turning happiness into the thing to have a nuclear relationship meltdown about? Not just anyone can manage that."

"We have a special skill." Nodding.

"Mind you, I just recently convinced my boyfriend to trash his relationship with his parents -- possibly permanently -- to go on a half-cocked cross-country road trip with my lunatic little brother, so I shouldn't talk."

"It must run in the family."

"If that's the case, then we got it from our parents, and they're still going strong." He points out with something resembling hope.

"That's only because we've lit up their lives so much."

"You're probably right. Of course, if the answer is having a lot of children -- I think we're both screwed."

"Damn."

"Joking at least partly aside, you and Celery? Is that... I mean, you talked, right?"

I shrug.

"There was talking, also yelling and crying." And some other stuff we'll just leave alone for now. "But the resolution was that we're going to try. I'm not really sure how or what we're going to do, but trying was definitely agreed upon."

"That's good," I don't reply, "Isn't it?"

"I hope so. It's something anyway. I'm just not sure if it's enough."

"Well it's a start at least?"

I nod. "Yeah. I just hope it's not going to be another false one."

"I get details sometime later eh? I mean, I'll put up with the glossing over for now but..."

"Yeah. Later definitely. It's too fresh right now, I'm too raw." I shake my head. "Some of it... hating him was almost a possibility for a minute there Kyle, and I didn't even know there was a place inside me for that."

Kyle's only answer is the hand he briefly places on my shoulder.

"But enough, for once, about me. What about you? Stuff with Jonas -- I've missed something there, haven't I?" Finally having worked up the courage to approach the subject.

Nodding, Kyle answers, "There's been... distance. Since everything with his parents. He's taking it all a lot harder than he lets on or I'm sometimes able to understand. He hasn't been letting me in enough to try and make it better, and I don't know if I'd be able to if he did." He shrugs.

"Plus, there's a lot of pressure you know? I mean, to make things good because like... it's gotta be worth it you know?"

"Kyle," Gentle reproach in my voice. "I'm sure he's not thinking about it

like that."

Shrugging again, "Yeah, but I am. Which is enough for both of us. I mean, he's seriously if not permanently damaged his relationship with his parents like -- for ME. Which is ridiculous, when you think about it."

I smile. "Not so ridiculous, really."

Kyle dismisses the teasing reassurance with a wave of his hand. "They're his PARENTS Carrots. That means stuff for him not even I fully get."

"Parents are tricky," doing a little nodding action of my own. "But he trusted you enough to get this far, and he came here with us, even though he knew the repercussions. He chose YOU."

"Which was either the first step to get back to the way we were or the worst thing that ever happened to our relationship. I'm honestly not sure which."

"Yours came with you -- mine RAN from me. I'm still winning."

Kyle laughs, short but genuinely. "What do you think it would do to either of our chances if they knew we were keeping score?"

"You gonna tell them?"

"No."

"Then I don't see a problem."

Kyle raises his eye brows teasingly, "A situation Carrots Vasskez can't find anything to angst about in?"

I sigh. "There are plenty of problems." My tone turning serious again.

I've been hitting the reverse Shanghi a lot lately, breaking the light and humorous mood with serious melancholy. Maybe it's all the death cab.

"They're not bigger than us, I think we've all started to disbelieve that a bit, but if we pay attention, we can help each other come back from that."

"I didn't even notice you guys cracking..."

"So start noticing Carrots. We need you to -- YOU need you to."

"Can I start by listening?"

An only marginally reluctant smile. Kyle and I are still okay.

"Ask and you shall receive."

I take a moment, thinking about things that make Kyle distinct. Things that matter and affect him outside of Jonas. Outside of me.

"How's everything with school? The whole University scene," I know enough to guess it hasn't all been sunshine and roses. Coming out at school, the masses of high school friends to suddenly explain a mellow eclectic male love interest to.

"Nothing much has changed, since I first started talking about it, started brining him around. The people who were cool with it immediately still are, and the ones who couldn't handle it I haven't really tried to convince. It sucks a bit, obviously, cause these were people I always cared about, but there weren't many big surprises. The core people remained. And really, it's not like I'm all that different. It took awhile for them to get fully acquainted with it yeah, but then they realized that Jonas fits exactly with the guy I've always been. His gender is secondary for them, just like it is for me."

"So you haven't started frequenting the GLBT centre and participating in the Drag Shows?"

Kyle laughs.

"No. But I'm not hiding anything, which maybe I was a little at first." He admits it calmly, the issue already accepted, the guilt and anger dealt with and put aside.

I remember several loud fights about it. Kyle didn't announce his new relationship as promptly as Jonas, even after the Dairy Queen event with Julie. Jonas was less than thrilled when he realized this. But as Kyle's tone reflects, they've put it behind them. With everything going on with his parents, they have bigger fish to fry.

"You think maybe they're not talking about us?"

Kyle smiles.

"I think they're probably talking about them. We're a part of that."

"Is Jonas okay?" Cause none of this has really made that clear for me.

"Yeah. Like I said about all of us, he'll be okay if he lets himself, and we're going to be there to make sure he does."

"Does anyone know what the hell is up with the twins?"

"No. Or, Jonas maybe, but he's not talking."

"But it's not... I mean, it's serious maybe, but not like, deadly, right? We'd know about that?"

"Sure. Yeah. Maybe."

"That's very comforting Kyle."

"I honestly don't know what's up with them lately. I've noticed a lot of weird stuff and I haven't been aware enough to notice much. You're not the only one who can get trapped under his own issues."

"That's slightly more comforting, in a depressing way."

"I try."

"Do they, I mean, I seem to vaguely recall them looking up to me once. Both of us."

"Yeah. I think they're over that now."

"They said something about Braden right?"

I don't know much about the kid beyond his association with my brothers. He likes the things they do and presumably shares their sense of humor (the laughter levels coming from the twins room are always especially loud when he's over) but that's about it.

"Right. Could be anything, if it's just a he's-our-friend-and-thus-we-worry thing. I don't know though... the way Jonas seemed to understand without them saying much makes me think it's some weird twin thing."

"Well, they are closer to him, maybe they'd already talked to him about it."

Kyle shrugs. "Could be."

"What about Kara?"

"You mean, is she okay?"

"Yeah."

"I think... I think she's 11. That sucks."

I tilt my head back in remembrance, and then grimace. "It totally does."

"Other than that, I have no clue. Her and mom still talk lots though I think, so I assume she's alright."

"But we shouldn't have to right? Just assume?"

Kyle sighs, and offers no answer.

Then the door is opening and Jonas scores another point for convenient timing. They've been crying I think, but now Celery and Jonas stand united, Celery's arm resting on Jonas's shoulders the way it used to be so at home on mine.

Why is it that everyone is suddenly more comfortable around him than me?

Kyle has tensed slightly, not at the intimacy being expressed between them but at my potential reaction to it.

Strange that the four of us may become combatants.

Frowns are now so easy to form.

"Miss us?" Jonas wins again.

Celery blinks. Not the only one who wasn't expecting the defensiveness in Jonas's voice. I'm sure there'd been a plan about not taking side. I might even have been a part of it.

"We're not doing this." Kyle says evenly getting up and brushing his hands against his jeans.

No one protests, and by this passive silence everyone agrees. Jonas leaves Celery's side and takes his place on Kyle's left, their hands meeting automatically. I'm slower, but I find Celery's waist in time enough and slip my arm around it. I feel more real once his hand comes to curve around my shoulder, arm draped along my blades.

"Let's play Mexican Train." Comes Celery's seemingly random suggestion.

Because, you know, if there's anything my life has been seriously missing lately, it's Family Fucking Game Night. And the horribly, horribly shameful part is that that wasn't entirely sarcastic.

"What the devil is that?" I demand, and am reunited with both Jonas and Kyle, as they share my confusion. You'll notice I didn't saying something along the lines of, "what the hell are you talking about?! Now is not the time for confusingly titled games!"

"It's like Dominos on crack -- trust me, it's great."

He's all big eyed and earnest. I think I'm supposed to be angry with him and confused, but what I'm doing instead is melting into a soppy little metaphorical puddle.

Mexican Train it is then.

And yes, children, Mexican Train IS like Dominos on crack. This still isn't that insane of course, because you're still starting with DOMINOS, but what I've found after playing it for the past three hours is that it gets absurdly addictive the longer you play. So it's like crack in that respect also I suppose.

My favourite part though is that through the rhythm of the game, we've found the rhythm of being together. Not me and Celery, we're not there yet, and if Jonas and Kyle were to leave I'm sure we'd end up floundering again, but the four of us have found our footing together. We're remembering how to be, and it's really quite wonderful. I might have even said magical, but then I would have been forced to make fun of myself.

We tease each other and shout random accusations of cheating and there's a great deal of kicking going on under the kitchen table. More than once, in the flow of the game it seems completely natural to drop kisses on Celery's cheek or drop my hand to rest it on his knee while I'm concentrating on building my train.

The goodness is such that it doesn't even go away after Saul comes home and finds us all sitting around the kitchen table shouting at each other and rapidly placing colored plastic tiles in their appropriate positions. I'll admit that it diminishes slightly, at least initially, when I bristle and momentarily want to locate sharp objects, but then it's my turn again, and I'm mostly distracted by such thoughts. When that stops distracting me, I calm myself the good old fashioned way, which would naturally be by distancing myself from the situation and imagining how everything must look to him instead of obsessing about how it feels for me.

I imagine we look like exactly what we are. Which is brothers. In moments like this, when it's the four of us, everything else has a habit of going away for awhile. The fact that some of us also happen to be lovers goes and sits in another room. Alliances shift and familiarity comes in different forms. If I say something, Celery may understand it best but Kyle will accept it first, and if a strange look briefly shutters Jonas's eyes, Kyle may notice it before anyone else, but Celery will be the only one who knows why it was there at all. But mostly we're too busy laughing and taunting each other for heavy words and hidden looks. As brothers we worry less about whether or not me and Celery will get back to the way we

were or the ways Jonas's parents rejection is causing him and Kyle to come undone. The security of these bonds is separate from the other types of love we share, less fragile and so it's the rock we're all happily clinging to.

To Saul, who loves someone none of us know or have even met (I think I might have glimpsed him once in the first grade) I suppose seeing us like this must be very strange. We've found our old rhythm and so naturally we've also found our language, which is refining itself seamlessly as the evening progresses, as we catch each other up on our new experiences and pet loves. I accept that "It's like ordering take out -- you know you're going to get it" is a perfectly legitimate thing to say and Celery is the last one of us to be subjected to having a finger pointed at us while Kyle says, "Consider the imperative" in answer to a question.

And thinking about all that is more than enough, especially considering that I'm only thinking about it a tiny bit of the time, as my attention remains primarily captured by the thrills of Mexican Train. Again, a disappointing lack of sarcasm there.

Still, there were things I didn't prepare myself for.

Like Saul's mother.

She bustles in late that evening, not seeming to notice or care that there are several strangers gathered around her kitchen table playing the crack version of dominos while her son looks on, leaning against the counter of her kitchen. She murmurs a hello to Celery that seems to be extended to all and sundry and is on her way to open the fridge when she catches the look on Celery's face out of the corner of her eye and does a double-take. She stares, after that, for a long moment at the space between us, and the looks in both our eyes. At the end of it, her attention focuses solely on me, and she sighs grimly, as if everything is suddenly clear to her and the picture isn't entirely pretty. I shift uneasily under her intense scrutiny, feeling inadequate in my ripped jeans and faded Weakerthans T-shirt and defensive because of it. I also have to fight a blush, knowing Celery had left marks on me my shabby clothing didn't fully hide.

It's the first time it occurs to me that if she sees them, Jonas and Kyle had probably noticed them as well. I flush slightly, losing that battle.

"These are John's brothers mom," Saul supplies; even she's clearly guessed this already.

She nods before responding. "I've heard so many wonderful things about each of you," There's a genuine and warm smile suddenly framing her face, making her look much less threatening, and I allow myself to relax slightly.

"Can I guess that you're Carrots?" She says to me with the same infuriating confidence my mother has spoken with countless times. I understand a bit better why Celery feels so at home here.

"That's me," I say after swallowing my remaining anxiety away, and get up to awkwardly shake her hand.

"And you assured me you were the shy one," She teases, looking at Celery.

He makes my blushing of several seconds ago slightly less shameful by his own colored cheeks.

"I am, it's just the attempt at politeness, its throwing him off his game."

Saul's mother laughs and I reward Celery with a sharp kick, which she also seems to approve of.

"And I'm afraid I can't claim super human mother instinct on these ones either, but I'll guess that you are the legendary Kyle?"

Kyle looks downright alarmed at the title, but he nods easily enough.

"That's me. It's um, nice to meet you?"

She chuckles a bit at the way his voice formed a question without meaning to, and keeps the resulting smile on her lips.

"I hope so -- I for one have waited a long time to see the people I've spent so many nights sitting at this table hearing about."

Celery carefully avoids my searching look, but I'm soon distracted, watching as Saul's mother brings her focus lastly to Jonas.

"The lack of family resemblance and dreads give me away don't they?" He asks with something resembling a grin.

"I'm afraid so," She says with an answering grin. "The purple eyes help as well." She adds eventually.

"I hardly ever even wear the contacts anymore." Jonas defends himself, but comfortably.

"Stop being so rude mother," Saul suddenly cuts in. "You know all about them and they don't even know your name yet."

For a moment, she almost looks flustered. "That is rude, you're quite right my son. I am, beyond being Saul's devoted mother," He snorts with affection, "A person in my own right, with my very own name. Which happens

to be Sandy."

"I like the S theme." I say, nodding. We'll see who's the shy one.

"Do you?" Her eyes are merry. "I'm glad. I do as well. Actually, I was so fond of it that I had to divorce Saul's father." I blink. "His name was Harold you see." She shakes her head. "It didn't fit at all."

"While we're doing introductions," Saul cuts in again, something I'm grateful for this time, as I didn't have a clue as to how to respond to Sandy's last comment, though I was initially tempted to laugh. "I know I've been kind of lurking and that by way of logical assumption you've both already guessed who I am, but just to say it, I'm Saul, officially."

"Hi Saul," Kyle says with a look that I know is mostly about me, and probably isn't going to do much to ease the remaining tension in the room, but I appreciate it anyway.

"Hi Kyle," Saul says with something resembling warmth.

Jonas nods and Saul does likewise and that's the sum of their introduction.

"I see you three have been brought over to the dark side," Sandy's rather gleeful voice fills the silence, nodding towards the dominos spread across the table.

"You're going to demand partial credit aren't you?" Celery groans.

"Naturally! I was the one who first convinced you to play was I not?"

Celery rolls his eyes at her tone.

"Yes you did. You were right, I was wrong. You're smarter than me, be smug."

"I will thanks." She says, well, smugly.

"I still can't believe you collected on that bet." Saul joins the conversation, shaking his head.

Before I can ask, 'what bet', Celery has launched into an explanation. "Sandy was always trying to get me to play, and I was always refusing, mostly because," He turns to me, "Do you remember the time we played regular dominos with your dad? I think he was his birthday or something, and we finally caved after he'd been harassing us to play for months?" I remember. It was horrible. "Anyway, because I figured this was just like MORE dominos, I kept saying no. But, eventually insomnia and the promise of hot chocolate won the day and I agree to play. Still a skeptic, but

Sandy bet me that I would be totally addicted in no more than three games."
He shrugs. "I lost in one."

"What was the bet?" Kyle asks.

Sandy throws her head back and laughs. "He had to play in a Mexican Train tournament at the centre I work at."

Celery shudders at the memory. "It was filled with old Mennonite men."

"You won didn't you?!" She protests.

"Yes I won," Celery admits tiredly, but there's a joyful spark in his eyes.
"And I made some friends."

"Volunteers there every Sunday now," Sandy says proudly.

"Yeah mom, he's a prince among men."

I raise my eye brow and Sandy claps her hands together. "I think that's enough teasing banter for the evening, shouldn't at least one of you go to school tomorrow?" Implying, I'm guessing, that if that's so, they should be getting to bed, as it's rather late.

"I'm taking a flex week." Saul provides and Celery simply shrugs. This is apparently enough to satisfy Sandy.

"Well, not all of us can be layabouts, and seeing as it's late and my morning early, I'll say good night to you now children."

I barely have time to register the Royal Tennenbaum quote before Sandy is tapping Saul and Celery on their heads by way of farewell, smiling parting towards Jonas, Kyle and I and is out the door.

Saul shrugs. "She's like that." Which I suppose is meant to explain something, but I don't really know what.

Before the silence can get heavy Celery takes my hand and holds it naturally which is better than anything he might have said to fill it up. Jonas and Kyle take to leaning against each other and I can't help the victorious feeling I feel in the pit of my stomach at the dynamics of our group, Saul standing alone.

"I may not have to get up early, but I still like sleep, so I think I'm going to go get some." Saul announces not quite abruptly, but apropos of nothing.

"We'll see about doing something tomorrow eh?" Celery questions lazily.

"Rally the troops or whatever?" It's almost a concession to Saul, but I don't mind it, because such a plan has already been discussed between us.

"Sure." Saul nods. "Well, good night everybody."

That's it for Saul and it's the brothers Vasskez and their compatriots along in the kitchen once more. Having maintained myself this long, I'm feeling exhausted and going to bed, quite possibly with Celery, sounds way too good to pass up.

"Bed?" This question goes out to the one I love.

A sort of quiet happiness settles over Celery's features and he nods.

"Back to the hotel for us then eh Jo?" Kyle slides the concept by Jonas.

"Yeah, that sounds about right." Jonas answers mid yawn, stretching slightly in anticipation.

Celery protests, "You guys could stay... I mean, there's my floor, or the couch?" He seems fully aware of the unattractiveness of this offer, but determined to make it genuinely anyway.

"No thanks." Kyle's verbal response is backed up by Jonas's facial expression.

Following this the expected and appropriate farewells are exchanged but as they start to actually leave, I panic slightly and so blurt out, "I'll walk you guys out," I offer Celery's hand a parting squeeze, diligently avoid eye contact and dash after Jonas and Kyle.

Safely on the outside of the front door, Jonas and Kyle smile sympathetically.

"You guys are really cool with leaving?" The need for something to say.

"Oh yeah." Kyle nods positively. "We really need to go to our bed... cling to each other for awhile and promise nothing like this will ever happen to us."

An empty smile coming from and meaning nothing forms on my lips, "Right, well, have fun with that."

"We shall."

After Kyle and Jonas are gone I return inside and Celery and I go silently into his room. Wordless we remain as we go through the necessary motions to get ready for bed. When the lights are out however, sleep doesn't

follow and soon we're sitting up in his bed in the dark, waiting for the other to say something to relieve the tension or add to it enough to garner a response.

Never one for patience, nor very successful at winning a silence contest with Celery, I speak first. "You love them." I figure, if I'm going to be the one, we might as well start off with a bang.

Celery doesn't rise to the possible bait, but nods slowly. "Yeah. I guess I do."

"And they love you. Separate and independent of me. So you got what you wanted. You matter to people I don't. You can be someone who doesn't need or depend on me. Where does that leave us?"

He finds my hand in the dark, and holds it tightly. "I'm trying to find a way to reconcile these two lives I've been leading, to find a way that they can fit instead of warring against each other. I'd like if at all possible to have my cake and eat some of it too. And I'm asking you for the time to try to make that work. But all I NEED, what's bottom line essential and always has been -- no matter what the hell people call me -- is you. We do this on your terms. What you want, what you need, what you're comfortable with. All I want is for us to be US again. Everything else is just gravy."

It's extremely tempting to be won over by such an impassioned (and I do believe genuine) speech, but I don't want to make promises in the dark I can't keep in the light of day. So I squeeze his hand, drawing him down into a lying position with me. I kiss his forehead and our eyes meet in the darkness.

"We'll just take it one day at a time okay? I'm staying, we're trying. Who knows what tomorrow will bring."

Celery nods and returns mine with a forehead kiss of his own.

"Good night Carrots."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty-Six
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sat, 30 Oct 2004 20:22:27 -0600

In the spirit of 'welcome to my world', I find myself on a bus with Celery and Saul, headed towards a favourite skate spot where we will rendezvous with the rest of their happy little band and general wackiness will ensue. Saul is in the seat across from the one Celery and I share, casting furtive glances in my direction occasionally, but mostly muttering to himself about light and angles and flipping through a copy of Scientific America. At my side, Celery has his knee pressed up against mine, but is attempting no further contact. We're not talking, but it's mostly just spontaneous silence, not forced by anger or frustration.

Jonas and Kyle declined my invitation to join in on this particular leg of the Calgary adventure, opting instead to hang about the hotel room (this may or may not involve a considerable amount of sex, but I'm trying not to think about that) and maybe do some exploring on their own. In a way, I don't get this at all, because the whole point of being here is supposed to be to see Celery, but then I think about the fact that really, this is about me and Celery, and making them spend too much time with us and our drama will do no good, not to mention that I'm technically supposed to be experiencing Celery's reality here, not shunning his friends to seek solidarity with Jonas and Kyle, as I'd be liable to do if they came along. And if you sort through all that, there's quite possibly a logical reason for Kyle and Jonas staying behind that I've at least half convinced myself I'm okay with.

We arrive, and I'm safe from at least initial shocks - it's a typical spot and could be anywhere really. Slightly more populated than the little corners we used to find for ourselves where the sessions that would start out being the two of us lazily competing but would inevitably dissolve into me propped up against some wall or ledge, sketching him and otherwise drinking up the sight of Celery doing something he loves.

But already, as soon as my feet hit pavement getting off the bus in fact, I know this will be dramatically different. Instead of shying away from crowds and turning to me with a smile that begs me to suggest we go somewhere else that we can skate alone, Celery is shielding his eyes against the sun and grinning as three bodies break away from the small concentration of skaters and begin skating in our general direction. Celery waves.

The distance between us crossed, we are served with a chorus of 'hey's'. Saul gets acknowledged as if he is an appreciated bit of the scenery but the attention they focus on me is none too subtle. Three pairs of eyes fixed directly on me, one holding friendliness, one curiosity and the other

anxiety and suspicion.

I figure if I'm being inspected, I might as well return the favour, and look each of them over carefully. Closest to the back of the group is a average looking guy with sort of washed out brown hair and eyes, wearing the beginnings of a friendly smile to match his eyes and a long sleeved T-shirt that says, Listen to Denny Petkins. To the left and slightly in front of him is a stocky dude (and this choice of word is deliberate and necessary) with frothy blonde hair, pale blue eyes the sort of clothes you'd expect to see on a surfer in cool weather. I notice belatedly that he was riding long board, not a skate board. The female of the group -- Jake -- has short tussled black hair and a gentle prettiness in all the features of her face. She looks, however, to be at least partially masking that, with a glare already forming and a defensive body stance. I also notice she's eyeing Celery protectively, when she's not busy glaring at me.

"I thought you'd be shorter man." Remarks the long boarder. I'm mostly distracted from his comment by his gravely surfer drawl.

"Kory, remember how we discussed this? The part about avoiding comments that will get me into trouble?" Celery looks pained.

"Dude, how is a comment about his height going to Mick Dundee you?" Kory the long boarder asks, genuinely confused. And can I just say, what the hell does Mick Dundee mean?

Celery sighs, but there's something like weary affection in it. Kory grins, apparently understanding that he's been forgiven.

"Anyway. Carrots -- this is Kory,"

"Greetings dude." He holds out his hand and I shake it with little reluctance. I even smile. Apparently I'm easily charmed by people with ridiculous and unexplainable accents.

"Hey."

Celery is working on controlling a gleeful beam and the success of our introduction, which my now strangely accommodating mood isn't irked by.

"And that's Denny," He says cheerfully, pointing at the guy hovering in the back.

Denny waves and breaks out the full smile. A little begrudgingly, I smile back.

Celery pauses rather warily before saying, "And finally, Jake."

"Hi Jake," I say when all she does is stand there awkwardly.

"Look, so, just to get this out of the way before anything else -- understand that I'm aware that technically I should probably be madly in love with him, causing us to engage in a various array of passive aggressive behavior towards each other and inevitably resulting in hair pulling nail scratching chick fight of epic proportions -- but I'm really not." She shoots Celery a look of fond revulsion. "Like, at all. And I don't know, things are weird enough already, and the last thing we need is more tension caused by a cliché driven misunderstanding right?"

For several minutes, I simply stand there, blown away by her ability to speak so quickly. Once my brain has caught up, it latches onto 'chick fight' and I demand, "You crazy Albertans realize I'm not a girl right? Cause, I mean I know he's like, kind of bigger than me in the like, shoulder region or whatever, but I'm actually still a guy."

"We got it dude." Kory assures me heartily.

"Yeah, sorry... chick fight! That was bad." Jake face palms herself.

Hyper active ditziness. Why wasn't I aware this was something people (read: Celery) could find so endearing? You think someone would have warned me.

"It's okay." I mutter, shocking everyone, especially Celery, by smiling and clapping her on the shoulder.

She smiles and then breezes, "Oh yeah, and if at all possible, try not to hurt him anymore, cause if you did then I'd have to try to kill you and you know, it probably wouldn't work that well, and I'd end up having to go to prison and you wouldn't even be dead, so I'd have nothing to show for it. Nobody wants that right?"

This time I manage to blink instead of just standing immobile, but that's about the sum of my accomplishments. It's not just the rapid fire speech this time, but the fact that she was deadly serious. In a vaguely terrifying way.

Celery, who looked so hopeful about how things were going a moment ago, now appears ready to bury his head in the ground. Denny notices this and attempts to soothe him.

"Take it easy Johnny boy, she's just expressing her innate Jakeness -- soon he'll grow to love her for it as we do."

"Or you know, put up with her with mild bitterness." Saul adds casually.

I raise my eye brows at him slightly, a smile forming of its own accord on my lips. He smiles back. It's almost a moment.

However, I have to get back to the matter at hand.

"Yeah John, relax." My tone leaves Denny no room to miss the error he name using the J-word, and he glances at Celery apologetically.

Celery waves him off. "It's okay. The damage is already done and not by you. Let's just skate okay?"

That works for everyone and soon all you can hear are the familiar sounds of wheels on pavement and metal against metal as tricks are made, rails grinded. There's skin on pavement as well, the occasional thudding and resulting groans that come with the inevitable crashes.

I'm glad to be reminded of the oblivion I forgot skateboarding offered. And of the rush too, coming not only from landing tricks, but skating at Celery's side.

Taking a break, we lean against each other on a near by curb, sitting in perfect silence. It's been a long since we sat together bathing in the all encompassing tiredness of this activity. I find myself realizing that in addition to everything else, I missed watching it. How sweet tricks look when landed, the spontaneous outpouring of sympathy and amusement when someone gets worked trying a trick the exact same way you did once. In the wondrous simplicity of this moment, I'm almost tempted to take his hand.

"So what do you think?"

"Of what?" It's refreshing to ask something without defensiveness, just curiosity.

He smiles softly, and motions at our general surroundings. "Of my life."

I pause in length before replying.

"I think I need to see more of it before I render my verdict."

The memory of a smile remains of Celery's lips. "Alright."

He gets up soon after to return to skating, but I remain at the curb, watching. He is exactly the same and yet totally different. Morbid fascination is the flavor of my observation as my eyes and ears (at least distantly) follow his movements and conversations.

Jake is perhaps the best non-pro skater I've ever seen, and watching her skate, I begin to understand why she and Celery get along. It's about

sharing a private language and caring by doing. She is protective also, not just of Celery, but all of them. Frenzied and disconnected are most of her words, but there's a calmness that settles over her as she skates I can see Celery would gravitate to, and there's a tenderness in her eyes.

"It's an eagle thing." Saul's voice in the ear comes as a surprise, but then, not.

"What?"

"Jake. You know, beautiful to look at but mess with one of her chicks and she'll claw your eyes out."

I sigh. "Don't any of you people understand that he's not yours?" I really see no point in beating around the bush with this kid. I don't even think he expects me too.

"But he is," He shrugs. "John is anyway."

"I'm getting a little sick of this whole split personality lark. Celery is who he is -- John's just the name some bastards who never loved him gave him that he hid under this year."

"Maybe that's how it started, but that's changed. You're still here, that means you've talked so I'm going to assume he's told you part of the reason he left to come back here is because he's started to be happy here. That means something."

"He didn't come here because he was happier, he RAN away because he's a fucking self-hating coward."

Saul doesn't reply, and soon I get up and stalk away, eager to skate away some of the tension.

Unfortunately, this doesn't really work, and I remain wound up for the rest of the afternoon. My tension gets picked up by the rest of the group and naturally, especially Celery, and after waging at least three separate silent battles on the way back to Saul's house and another vocal but possibly the least rational one I'm so frustrated and tired of being in a state of constant defensiveness that I break the terms of our agreement and tell Celery that I'm going back to the hotel.

The panicked look on his face immediately softens my resolve and eliminates my anger, but I know the latter part isn't likely to remain true for long, and I'm just SO tired. I take his hand and pull gently.

"Please. Just for tonight. I'll still be here, and I'll come by early tomorrow and we'll spend the day like we planned. I just need a rest."

The danger gone, he nods, understanding, I think, at least partly because he feels the same.

"Okay. You cool to take a cab by yourself? I could come with you,"

"No, it's okay. It's not very far. Thanks though," I don't have to work very hard to achieve a small smile. With slightly more difficulty, I lean up and kiss his cheek.

His eyes darken, but he turns around and starts walking away. "I'll call the cab." Comes softly over his shoulder.

Leaning up against the wall as I wait, I sigh.

When I get back to the hotel, Kyle asks,

"So, what are his friends like?"

"They're normal," I say incredulously, shaking my head. "They're just normal, decent people."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Something. Different, weirdness, our kind of cool. But they're nothing like me, or us, or the person Celery was. With them he's John, and he's normal too. They're nice and interesting enough but there's nothing... nothing about them to make me understand why he would leave me to live the life they offer him. I had no idea he wanted to be normal so badly, I never saw that so much of his weirdness was just to keep up with me. To please me."

"Carrots..."

"I don't mean to sound like I'm better than them, or him. That consciousness freakishness is somehow superior... except, I kinda always thought we'd agreed that it was, Celery and me. But that's changed, I guess. If it was ever the case at all."

"I'm sorry."

I wave the offered sympathy away. "No. It's my fault. I'm starting to realize how much of all this is," I laugh shakily. "It really kind of sucks too."

Kyle hugs me then, cause it's the thing people do in situations like this, and Jonas comes out of the bathroom a minute later toweling his hair. For some reason his presence makes me feel like crying.

"What's going on?"

"Celery's friends are normal." Kyle explains.

Jonas makes a face that almost erases my guilt concerning my own reaction.

"Weird," He says with a small shudder.

Kyle lets me go. "Hasn't anybody ever noticed that I'M normal?" He suddenly demands.

"What? No you aren't," Jonas denies quickly.

"Sure I am. You guys said it yourselves -- I'm the boring Hufflepuff. I like structure and routine. I have fairly mainstream music and movie tastes. I go to school and parties. I drive a crappy car and like sleeping in...."

"And have an insane boyfriend and family and an unexplainable passion for paintball and wish Fraggles was on DVD. Kyle, you're NOT normal."

"As normal as anyone else. It's all a matter of your grading standard, what you're comparing things to."

"Kyle, don't mess with my snap judgments of these people. They keep me strong."

He scoffs, but lets the matter drop.

Later that night after the rounds of avoidance on my part, I finally give the non-Cliff Notes version of everything that's been going on with Celery. Jonas closes his eyes and bows his head, saying nothing. At least some of it, I think, he knew already. Not so for Kyle, who gets up and starts pacing around, his knuckles growing rapidly whiter as his fists clench.

"What was he thinking?" He hisses.

Trying extremely hard to give a fair version, I explain it to Kyle the way it was explained to me.

"And that's enough for you?" Kyle asks when I'm done, with weak disbelief.

"No, not really. But HE is and I have to accept what he's done if I want to get him back," I shake my head, "Back to the way he was before."

"Do you even think that's possible?"

I shrug. "If it's not, if he's really all the way gone, then I'll deal with that too."

"How?"

Despite Kyle's gentle tone, I feel my nerves snap. "Look I don't know okay Kyle? Fuck! I just... I love him and I always will, I can't change that. Being without him is always going to hurt so much more and I just can't stand to live like that. I'm tired of it." I choke back a sob. "Christ, I'm just so tired."

And it hits me then, as I let the physical and emotional exhaustion settle on me fully, that I won't find my rest here. This 'strategic retreat' of mine, which is of course, actually the big-scarredy-cat runaway, will solve nothing. One night and already I'm spoiled by the familiar feelings of sleeping with his body next to mine.

"I have to go," I announce my decision. "I need to go to bed."

There's a brief communication of blinks between Jonas and Kyle and then Kyle gets up and says, "Okay, let's go."

We talk a little more, just Kyle and I, as we drive from the hotel to Saul's house.

"I just don't know what I'm supposed to do here, you know? Should I be slugging him to defend your honor?"

"Kyle," I say with a sad smile. "It's not like that."

"It isn't." Illuminated disbelief.

"Trying not to be, anyway. You love us both right? I don't want now to be the time we start drawing lines according to who's blood and who isn't. We've both screwed up and are screwed up. I'm mad as hell and can defend myself just fine, but I don't want you two to get damaged over this. It's OUR mess."

"But I'm overprotective big brother guy. It's my job to get involved in you life and fix stuff."

"Not this time okay Kyle?"

A bit of understanding passes between us, and he simply nods, not saying anything more for the rest of the ride. He slugs me in the shoulder before I get out of the car and my smile good bye is his reward.

It occurs to me as I'm walking up the steps that ringing the doorbell at

this hour is an incredibly rude thing to do, but debating whether or not I'm going to do it anyway becomes mute the minute the door is yanked open in anticipation of my arrival. I follow Celery's receding back into the house and remain as silent as he. I will learn later that Celery had been staring out his window waiting for me since we parted company.

He changes slowly and wordlessly into cotton pajama bottoms and gets into bed, turning his eyes to look briefly at me with `well what are you waiting for' type expectation before rolling onto his side and closing his eyes.

"Turn off the light when you're ready okay?" He asks with absurd normalcy.

I nod dumbly even though he can't see me -- not to mention that this is ludicrous on many other grounds -- drop my duffle to the floor and rummage until I find my own pajamas. I strip down, change into them, flick off the light and crawl into his narrow bed beside Celery.

We lie there in the dark breathing out of synch for a minute, our backs to each other, but then he turns over and wraps his arm around my waist, tucking his chin into my neck.

"Good night Carrots." He murmurs sleepily.

I settle in more comfortably against him. "Night."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty-Seven
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sun, 07 Nov 2004 22:04:21 -0600

I wish I could tell you how a conversation I was having with Jay resulted in me having a bleeding nose and him suffering from a rather nasty split lip, but I honestly don't remember. Well, actually, I'm pretty sure there isn't a legitimate reason TO remember, but all the same, details are a little hazy. The thing about it is, I'm fairly certain I didn't really even WANT to punch Jay in the mouth. But I definitely did. Of course, the thing about that is, you don't know who Jay is, so it's probably really hard for you to understand why it wasn't really him I wanted to punch, or for that matter why I still did.

So, let me backtrack a bit. We're going to figure this one out together.

See, after we last saw our heroes, in the touching good night scene, they fell asleep and all was well with the world. Or you know, something like that anyway. I find that things tend to go a lot more smoothly when I'm asleep, and this was not exception. Things got complicated again when we woke up. Because we were lying in each others arms, feeling rested and at home, except that we weren't. Well, we were rested, but we definitely weren't at home. At least, I know I wasn't, and I didn't exactly love the idea that Celery might feel differently. After I went through that weird spacy, "where the devil am I?" thing you get when waking up in a strange bed, I was faced with the less than ideal reality, which was that we were crammed together in a cot like bed in a makeshift bedroom in Saul's house. Not entirely what dreams are made up.

Still, he kissed me good morning and we successfully evaded getting into a fight all the way from the bed to the shower to the kitchen table. Further conflict evasion was achieved by way of a strategically placed phone call to Kyle and Jonas's hotel room, requesting they come over and spend the day with us in some fashion. They readily agreed and showed up slightly before Saul graced the kitchen with his presence and nobody caused trouble, so we were out the door shortly after that. The four of us that is -- Saul wasn't invited. To his credit, he looked in no way like the expected to be.

We spent the day primarily drama free, getting a sufficiently sarcastic and depreciating tour of selected areas of Calgary at the hands of our fearless tour guide, Celery a.k.a John a.k.a "heads-up dude!" (this title having to do with the pigeon Celery narrowly missed getting crapped on by, a fate he was saved from the helpful shout of the same name coming from an observant stranger walking behind us). I kept my angst driven ire to a minimum, even in the face of the several strangers we bumped into over the course of the "and this is my mall, wherein I slave happily for mother capitalism and sell more trendy shirts to annoying 14-year-old girls than skateboard

decks" portion of our tour. I even managed to not freak out when this random girl wearing a tag that says SIRENS: Tammy came out of no where and tried to simultaneously hit on Celery and Kyle. It was actually not especially hard to keep myself under control during this incident, as the girl was terrifying and Celery looked revolted the whole time, while Kyle looked panicked at his own lack of interest. Jonas and I shared a smirk about the whole affair, as we all moved on with our day. After our feet were sore and I'd declared Calgary to be, "shinny, oddly clear and not as cool as Winnipeg" we stopped at the Olive Garden for supper (cause, when we're there, we're family, and we like to suspect that "family" in some way refers to the mob, as we do about all Italian restaurants, because ethnic stereotypes are fun) and that was pretty much it for the night. Celery got an exciting tour of his own (of our hotel room), and then we all hung out watching pay perview movies and kicking each other.

All in all it was a good day among brothers featuring one or two schmoopy public displays of affection and a refreshing lack of angst. It wasn't until we went back to his store the next day (that could also be known as Today), just Celery and me (because Kyle and Jonas had important things to do like sleep in and have a fight about how Jonas was going to approach facing his parents considerable wrath when we got home) that things got out of hand.

Admittedly, I got the day off to a less than triumphant start when I requested in a deeply wronged manner for a few helpful facts about the people we would be meeting, since, "they clearly know all about me and I'd rather not go through another emotional ambush, thanks."

Celery stuttered out a reply, generally along the lines of, "It's not like it was this big exposition of your soul -- I didn't even tell them about you really -- well, I did but just more... what you mean to me. A little history, a warning that things might get kind of intense..."

I shrugged (we could fight about it later). "I still want to know about them. Advanced names would be something, if you're worried about breaking some code of silence."

He rolled his eyes, which it's possible he was entitled to do. "We're just stopping at the store to pick up Jay -- cause he's sort of useless to tell directions to and still hasn't managed to find Saul's house and the mall is closer than where he lives -- and Jared's going to be there too. Jay is 17 -- in grade 11, he's an okay guy. Kind of a hothead but in a funny way... like he got suspended from school for something and he shouted "the school's going down!" and got suspended again." I wondered briefly if I was supposed to find this charming. "And Jared's like the best. He's the manager of our store, he gave me my job, did all the training for me and everything. He's really... just like smart and level headed. I really love working for him."

So okay. Perhaps I was already biased towards the both of them. And maybe this little tribute speech already had me ready to hate Jared's guts with special vehemence, but the simple fact is, from the minute I met him, it became clear to me that Jared was doomed to be my least favourite of Celery's new friends. He had all the assumptions about his place in Celery's life that Saul did, and yet I'd never heard of the guy. He had a propensity to clap Celery on the shoulder in a manly, affectionate brother/mentor sort of way and this arrogant half smile always on his face. Also, I wasn't overly fond of his hair. Who uses gel anymore anyway? Still, no one else seemed to see Jared for the smarmy weasel he clearly was, at least none of his dedicated employees, who lavish him with praise and obedience, as if working in a chain store in the mall is the greatest gift they could ever have received.

As Celery told me, we don't stay there long, in this little haven of Jared worship, because the world is calling to us, and we must answer that call. There is, it's safe to say, always something new going down at Mr. Sub. Celery's life is busy and exciting. There's always another skate spot to try, or a show to go to, or someone calling him on his cell phone with a problem from work or wanting to hang out. He is in high demand and accommodating to everyone. Traveling around the city with him, Jared and Jay, adding and reducing numbers as random friends come out of the wood work, I feel as though I am merely one of his posse. Despite Jared's age and supposed wisdom and maturity, he follows Celery with as much commitment and dedication as the rest. He's calm and funny and showers love on everyone, and means it, and I find myself liking him, this new version of my oldest friend, but naturally, I find myself resenting and rejecting any kind of newness, anything I recognize as other. Part of this John persona.

But of all of this, Jared's presence continued to grate on me the most, I suffered over the course of the day, as we went to several different skate spots, took in a movie and several trips to 7/11 for candy, several wild moments wishing for Saul's presence, because I was convinced that Saul couldn't stand Jared either. I began to suspect this was indeed his true reason for failing to join us.

But as Saul wasn't with us, I had no one to share my eye rolls and bitter out-of-the-corner-of-my-mouth comments with, so I held the impulses in and unwisely allowed my malice to simmer and grow in the pit of my stomach all day long. Which, doesn't perhaps do much in the way of justifying what I did, but it gets us at least part of the way along to explaining it.

Of course, what must be noted when searching for the other part of the explanation, is that I did not in fact punch Jared, who I maintain had it coming. The thing about it is, as much as I spent the entire day wanting to draw blood from his condescending sickly sweet mouth, it wasn't Jared who was talking some sort of preposterous trash about I don't even remember

what, his slightly nasal voice invading my brain to the point where I was certain I'd either have to find some (preferably violent) way to shut him up, or I'd go insane. It was Jay.

And so, despite the fact that it wasn't as though I really wanted to punch Jay and that I WANTED to punch Jared, with his eyes full affected wisdom and concern about doing 'what was right for Celery', and his arm around Celery's shoulders, pretending he was somehow necessary to Celery, thinking he could be some sort of Calgary Kyle, it WAS Jay who was just conveniently there, shooting his mouth off, being a typical, posturing 17-year-old male. It was simply far too easy to join him there and clock him in the mouth.

So I punched Jay and I may or may not have said, "the price is wrong bitch", and then he DEFINITELY punched me in the nose and then there were a few unsuccessful attempts on both our parts to kick each other before Celery and Jared noticed what was going on and rushed over, separating us and sputtering with disbelief. We both sort of refused to answer their questions along the lines of, "what the hell man?" and stared at the floor petulantly. It felt distinctly like I was 5 again, except that I never really got into a fight with anyone when I was five.

And while the fact that I'd just engaged in some senseless and extremely stupid violence didn't escape me, I couldn't help feeling vaguely smug as Celery calmly slung my arm around his shoulder and helped me hobble away. Because see, he didn't apologize, or even try to suss out some sort of explanation from me. This means -- if you'll follow some twisted Carrots and Celery logic for a moment -- he's not ashamed of my behavior, embarrassed or even surprised by it. He views this gross lapse in judgment and common decency to be my right, my privilege. Not even (or only) because I have been wronged, by him and through these people, but merely because it is in his mind permissible and justified for me to act in whatever way I wish. Simply because I am me, everything is permitted.

Anyway, that pretty much brings us up to date, and I guess basically explains why I have a bloody nose and Jay has a slit lip but it doesn't explain why Celery, for all his previously explained lack of shame, is grinning so wide it's gotta hurt.

I wait until we're in the relative safety of Celery's room before demanding, "What the fuck are you grinning about?"

"You got in a fucking fist-fight with one of my friends! This is fucking awesome! You can't say ANYTHING to me now!"

Almost immediately, I realize what he means.

"Fuck you -- there's only one of Colin, you have like a posse. I mean, can you imagine what you would have done if there were five of him?"

The grin vanishes from Celery's face.

"Oh god," he exclaims with genuine horror.

In a minute, he recovers to say, "Whatever man. It's totally not the same thing. Not ALL my friends are as bad as Colin, hell, not even Jake is."

"It's not like it's a competition anyway. This isn't about blaming anyone."

"That's what you keep saying, but you haven't been acting like it."

Bastard has me there.

"Fine, fine, but now my one act of overt aggression equals all your passive aggression and we're even."

He sits heavily down onto his bed, as though suddenly void of energy his legs simply gave out. "Perhaps, in retrospect, extensive quality with my friends wasn't the best idea." A conciliatory admission.

Frustrated, bone tired and emotionally frayed I run my hands through my hair, sighing as if breathing out in the exact right way will make me feel better.

"Everything we try to do goes wrong. It's like we're totally out of sync. I can't catch up with you -- I can't understand you -- we don't... we just keep missing." I'm tired of this being our song.

His eyes flit over to the bed. Oh the sex we've been having lately.

"I think we've still got a pretty good handle on that."

"Yes! Yes we do - excellent! Way to think positive." The truly sad part is that I'm being sincere.

He grins a little more. "Personally, I think we should just have sex all the time."

"I like it, and I'll tell you why." Which I then fail to do.

He raises his eye brows. "Can I get away with suggesting you just show me?"

I ponder this briefly. "Yeah. I think you can."

And then he does. And bwaha to all of you, cause it's awesome, and I'm not

telling you a damn thing about it beyond that. Envy me.

Sadly, the hazy wonderful, I-just-got-laid-and-now-care-about-nothing after feelings don't stick around nearly as long as I'd like, and before you know it I'm back to being insecure and I find myself unable to take my eyes away from the still half opened drawer of his bedside table and the helpful contents located conveniently therein.

"Nice set-up you've got here, by the way." I say, offhandedly.

Celery's eyes follow mine and flash with something unexpected and sad before returning to meet my hostile stare.

"It's just left over stuff from the winter."

Celery is not the only one who is shocked at the next thing that snaps out of my mouth, "Got a lot more sex in the winter did you?"

After the ruthlessly long minute it takes him to recover, he sighs -- I'm going to take a stab and say -- wearily. A healthy dose of bitterness also making its presence known.

"Yeah actually. What with the seeing you and all. This dresser is actually mine, it's the only bit of furniture I brought along when I moved from Their house. I just... never got rid of the stuff. I kind of forgot it was there." Which of course, is a million times more plausible than what I was suggesting. "I'd never... you KNOW that I'd never do that. I couldn't even, I don't think. Even if I wanted to, which is a concept so alien I can't even contemplate it."

"I know." Because I do, and always have. That's the best part. "I was just..." Picking a fight. Going on the offensive. Trying to shake off this false (and it HAS to be false!) sense of peace and security.

He nods. "Yeah." And just like that, it's forgotten.

We're quiet for awhile but then, I whisper, "Hey Cel,"

"Yeah?"

"I've been thinking,"

He sniffs and I feel rather than see him turn his head slightly away from mine.

"What?"

"I'm just trying to restrain myself from making a comment like `never a

good sign' or `hope you didn't hurt yourself.'" He explains cheerfully.

I smack him. "That was me not restraining myself from giving you the blow you so richly deserved."

"You've gotten extremely violent, I've noticed."

"Yeah well, all that rage." I shrug.

"I feel this conversation veering into serious waters, what were you thinking about?"

"Oh that. Um, I'd been thinking since we're not having a huge amount of luck with trying to integrate ourselves back into the world as a couple we could just run away to some isolated wilderness location and raise goats."

"Goats eh?"

"That's right. Pigs are evil and scary, same goes for cows and I don't know... sheep just bother me. I know a lot of people think they're cute but I... I think something else may be going on there."

"Goats it is then."

"Celery?"

"Yeah."

"That's honestly the best plan I've been able to come up with."

"Probably just a local fishermen out for a pleasure cruise... through eel infested waters." It's soft, like I'm not supposed to hear it, but I do.

"There really aren't any topics that won't eventually lead us back to angst and gravity Celery." Like he doesn't know, like that isn't exactly what he meant, saying that.

"I know." Like I didn't.

"We really could just run away and raise goats Celery. I mean, I'm game if you are."

He smiles sadly. "I don't think we'd be very good at taking care of goats baby. They need to be fed regularly and tended and all that. We'd forgot they were there and then they'd all die."

He's something resembling joking, and yet I want to cry. Instead, I pout.

"Well I think it's a great idea."

He kisses my forehead. "Whatever you want baby."

It's enough for awhile to have simply found my way back into his arms, and to lie there with him, enjoying the sound of his heart beat against my ear. Unfortunately, my brain can't quite let this peace last.

"Why didn't I ever think about your 18th birthday? Why wasn't it the date upon which I pinned all my hopes and longing? Why, when I marked off the day on my calendar, that wasn't the one I was so desperate to finally get to?"

"Because we've always marked our lives by Septembers? Because the end of August is the end of the old year? Because June has always meant freedom and the date we met has always been the one it's truly important to celebrate?"

"Not because you never mentioned it?"

"Why would I have wanted to be away from you any longer than I had to?"
Tiredly.

"I don't know. The same reason you left in the first place?"

He's pulling away, letting me go, but I understand why. It hurts too much to have to say things like this when we're in each others arms.

"I left because I had to."

"But what kind of 'had' is that? For Them? To bow to them?" I shake my head, "I don't know why I ever believed that."

"We talked about this."

"I know. I remember... but there was something else. You're happy here. Did you leave because you 'had' to know if you could be? Outside of me?"

"Carrots..."

"Answer the question."

"Yes."

Every time I think my sails can't get more deflated.

"Well, bravo. You succeeded brilliantly." I think this is the part where I get up and leave, but I can't seem to get my body to cooperate.

"Care, it's not like that. I didn't... it was. I never meant," he sighs.

"I don't know."

"It's funny, because I distinctly remember having a rather substantial argument about you not resisting the move for entirely different reasons."

"I know. And it wasn't that I was lying. I told myself that was why I wasn't fighting it. I didn't... I wouldn't let myself know."

"We're blaming your subconscious now?"

"I just needed to see,"

"See what?"

"See. See if I had any strength, any WORTH outside of loving you. I needed to see if there could ever be people who valued me that hadn't loved you first."

"People who'd call you John."

"And only ever know me as me. Just me."

"I can't believe I made you doubt the possibility."

"I let myself doubt it. I could have told you how I felt."

"But we're so good at that aren't we? Conveniently failing to tell each other stuff." My classic head shake breaking up fun bouts of awful things I have to say, "I remember when I found it nearly impossible to be angry with you and now nearly everything you do fills me with ire... whether justified or not." He makes no comment, only shifts under me, so I'm resting more comfortably against his chest. I breathe in the scent of him, and take a moment to simply enjoy being surrounded by his touch before continuing, "Do you think maybe we made better friends than lovers?" A word in some ways, I still feel much too young to say.

Celery pulls one of my hands away from its place clutching my opposite shoulder and contemplates it for a time before responding with soft certainty, "We were always lovers... long before we ever touched each other or admitted why we wanted to. It was always going to be like this for us eventually."

"We were destined to bring masses of misery anger and confusion into each others lives?"

"We made each other deliriously happy for over 10 years, it had to balance

out somehow."

"Like some cosmic pleasure pain scale?"

"Yeah."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"It's a whole mountains and valley's thing Carrots."

"What? Mountains? Valleys?" I sputter. "Have you gone mad?"

"Come on Carrots. Be Zen and apathetic with me. It's fun."

"Celery!"

"Consider the bumble-bee..."

I jerk out of his arms, and his calm expression immediately disappears, replaced by one of flushed anger.

"What the hell do you want from me?! I try to apologize, you say you forgive me. We talk, I feel like we've communicated but then at every turn I hit another wall with you. You say you're angry about the ways I've hidden my life from you but when I try to show you all you do is snipe and insult my friends. I touch you and sometimes you pull away and the other times you respond with this desperate hunger and either way there's never any joy in it. All the trying I could think of didn't work, so I decided to give not trying a go."

"That's also... very stupid." And yet amusement has found its way into my voice. Making a surprising victory over shock.

"Yeah well, I can do no right." He grumbles the words almost good-naturedly.

I recapture the hand that once held my own.

"Weren't we supposed to be forgetting about our dramas and just having fun together this week?"

"Lord knows I've been trying."

I smile, dare I say it, seductively.

"Celery?"

He swallows. "Yes?"

"Lets try harder."

And I follow it up with a suggestive leer, because corny puns about sex should always be followed by suggestive leers.

Celery smiles weakly but holds onto my shoulders, keeping me at an arms distance. "I don't think we should... do that for awhile."

I frown, out of confusion more than hurt. Turning down sex is a foreign concept to me. Finally I back away casually, raising my eye brows. "This is a radical departure from our `lets just have sex all the time' plan of several hours ago."

"I know," He nods slowly. "It's just, sex makes things seem like they're okay when..." They're not.

I sigh. "I know." It's kind of why I was in favour of the plan.

"Cheer up Care. It's one of our plans -- it probably won't last long."

I laugh.

"I'll hold onto that then."

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty-Eight
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sat, 13 Nov 2004 16:58:27 -0600

We're yelling again. And that's depressing enough as it is, but the truly sad part is I don't even really know what we're yelling about. What I can tell you is that I'm extremely pissed off -- but that's at least partly due to the fact that we're yelling again, and I don't even remember why. In the midst of all this, right when I'm about to lay down some serious rage, Celery says something biting, and mocking and absolutely fucking hilarious and I'm incapable of stopping the peel of laughter that escapes me. I was standing up to emphasize my rage, and I'm laughing so hard I actually have to sit down.

"Damnit! I still like you better than anyone else even while I'm so many different kinds of furious with you I could draw blood."

The bastard actually grins. Smugly.

My death glare scares him about as much as not at all, and he takes a seat down beside me, pushing me gently backwards and then leaning over me to lie teasing half kisses across my face.

"Celery, what are we going to do?" I moan exhaustedly.

"Raise goats," He murmurs, still placing kisses lightly against my skin.

"Celll..." I protest rather unconvincingly.

"Hmm?" Progressing to my neck now.

"I think you're forgetting about our master plan."

"No I remember -- goats... mountain living. A nice cave with a view. Just us."

In a rare burst of inner strength I force my hands to grip his shoulders and keep him at bay.

"The other plan. The not having sex to solve our problems plan?"

He sighs, and rolls away without any more struggling (which he had been doing, half heartedly, up until this point). "Right. That plan."

"As you may recall, it was you who master minded that one."

"I should so very much invent a time machine so I can warn myself about

doing stupid stuff like that." He reflects yearningly.

"Until then -- and I'm not saying I don't like that plan -- we should probably try to sort this out."

"Do you even remember what we were fighting about?"

Damn.

"Well... no -- but there had to be a reason, right?"

"Yeah. I mean, we certainly always have great reasons to get upset with each other lately."

Sarcasm. So comforting. I could wrap myself in it and never feel scared again.

"Point. But, okay -- whatever the particular issue was isn't really important, but the source is right?"

"Right."

"So, let's break this down."

"Okay."

"We're stupid."

"Agreed."

"And really, really selfish." That one is harder to say.

"Yes." The reply not as lightly delivered.

"And we think lying -- especially to each other -- is super fun."

"Indeed."

"So what are we going to do about it?"

"I think maybe," he says with a sigh. "We're making this a lot harder than it has to be."

In a vague sort of way, I think he's right, but I'm not entirely sure what he means. "In what way?"

"It's just..." another sigh, and he waves his hand around distractedly. "I feel... I mean, we've been pretty much fighting all day -- all week even,

and yet... I'm happy. Right now Carrots, being with you even if it's hard and we're fighting -- it's the best time I've ever had."

In the silence that states my disbelief; Celery turns again to face me. "Look at my eyes Carrots." He commands.

Feeling strangely reluctant, I take my time doing it, but comply. I'm taken aback by what I see. They're blue. Perhaps not as bright as I've seen them, but they're consistently and firmly blue.

"See, here's how I think about it -- I did the coping mechanism thing cause I convinced myself I had to and I became someone else. Being Celery hurts to much? Well, simple, stop being Celery. So I become John, and I can be that guy Carrots. I've learned that much. I can go to school and work and have friends and be fucking normal and that's okay. That's enough for me; I can get myself to settle for that. And I'll have ups and downs like everybody else cause that's just a fact of life it's NORMAL. But there's no JOY -- that's only with you. Because I'm not normal when I'm with you, I'm so much more than that when I'm being the person only you can make me enough to be." He shakes his head, getting up and taking a quick pace across the length of his room.

"You know, the other day, when we were at the skate spot -- there was awhile when I was sitting at the curb with Saul and you were still out there, I think maybe you were trying to land a switch kick flip or something... but the point is, I was busy watching you, and suddenly Saul was like -- 'John, what the fuck is wrong with your eyes?' And I didn't know what the hell he was talking about and I said that he looked at me super oddly and said, 'Man, they're blue. Your eyes. They're a totally different colour than they're supposed to be.' Until then, I hadn't even fucking realized -- but every single day Carrots, 'happy' or not, everyday that I've been without you, my eyes have been grey. Always."

"Well if nothing else, over the course of this year, I'd have to say our impassioned speech giving capabilities have vastly improved."

He blinks, laughs, and draws me into a hug. "You realize that in my world, that's like you saying you love me and that we're okay again."

I make a few half hearted grumbly noises but eventually relent with a sigh, muttering, "Yeah, in mine too."

"So you want to make one?"

"What?"

"An impassioned speech."

"No, I think I'm good."

"I love you too, by the way."

It's absurdly wonderful to simply burry my head deeper into his shoulder and say, "I know."

Time passes in beautiful simplicity for awhile and then, "You know what we haven't done in awhile?"

This time I don't put any pretend reluctance and upset into my sigh. "This?"

He holds me tighter and I hear the smile in his voice.

"Yep."

It's me who kisses him then, not so we can have sex to pretend things are okay, but because, just maybe, there's a small possibility that they are.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Twenty-Nine

by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)

Date: Wed, 24 Nov 2004 20:44:14 -0600

The problem with ever thinking anything is okay ever, is that it's a really stupid thing to do. Because I mean, think about it. There's always going to be another fight, or tragedy or accident, or whatever. And there's this moment, when you realize that you'll never be safe. Not ever again. What's worse is that you realize you've NEVER been safe from disaster, and that every kind of misery that could befall a human being is waiting around the corner, bound and determined to smother you to death at any moment. Things don't even need to happen. Bombs live inside people everywhere, waiting to go off. Hormones and chemicals and synapses can betray without warning. And they do. They can take a perfectly wonderful moment and make it into something ugly simply by turning your feelings into ash before you even recognize the change.

There was no fight. There was just a 30 second phone call that broke through our fragile yet perfect seeming peace. 30 seconds was all my brain needed to swing viciously back into anger and melancholy for no reason I could justify and it made me so frustrated and sad that by the time he'd switched off his phone Celery's eyes widened in shock upon discovering there were tears in mine. This was some nameless fear, a bitterness at moments lost that had nothing to do with him, so I was allowed the comfort of his arms, but instead of buoying my mood, it pulled his down. We clung to each other glumly, not bothering to move or shed off excess clothes as the sky blackened outside his small window and the room slowly receded into darkness. Sleep came in small gasps and brought strange dreams, short and intense. We woke up and talked about them, but our dreams were never shared, and nothing ever made sense in the telling.

Morning arrived before any real rest was achieved and we were already making tiny cuts with our eyes and voices as we pried ourselves apart and showered because it was so easy and our heads hurt. I found myself resenting a happiness and clam that could be taken away so easily, so we fought about that too. It was far too automatic and simple to be angry with each other, and we hated that most of all. If I had been thinking about it, it might have occurred to me that all this tension was probably due to the fact that we were ignoring the inevitability of my approaching departure the next day, but I was not. Thinking about it that is.

But you know what's a lot more comforting and effective than you might think? Make up Yatzee.

Note the lack of sarcasm or jest.

After one more false start to recovery and the deep conversation fraught

with heart wrenching revelations No. 174.2 that followed the sniping of the morning, Celery and I got our sorry asses down to Kyle and Jonas's general location, which turned out to be a deli/bar they discovered when wandering around near the hotel that gave me warm fuzzies because it reminded me strongly of Cousins, especially in the board games at the back capacity, and I what meant to say in dramatically fewer words is we all met up at a deli and have since spent the day sitting around drinking Jones pop and playing Yatzee.

In between best-out-of-three tournaments Jonas seems nearly physically incapable of losing, we take turns making trips to the cooler for more drinks and going to the front counter for these abnormally large cookies I've theorized must have crack in them. Sometimes we go in pairs, and on one such occasion, Kyle takes the opportunity provided by Jonas and Celery's absence to punch me in the arm and congratulate on `becoming a man' in the sense that I've engaged in senseless violence for the very first time and finally released some of my aggression.

I take the opportunity to scoff audibly, "Yeah, and such a healthy outlet for my anger. He-man violence. My cup runs over with pride."

Kyle grins in the face of this caustic sarcasm. "It's just satisfying to have you come join the rest of us stupid testosterone driven males every once and awhile, that's all."

I try to avoid pausing to consider that the correct way to interrupt this statement would be to conclude I'm being called girly, and that Kyle's saying he's glad it's finally like he has a real brother around and instead take the track that prompts this reply. "So this is just you enjoying a chance to be smug about my most recent fall my grace, is that it?" I'm pretty sure there aren't many more grace rungs from which to plummet.

He nods. "Sure. Mere mortals like me have to get our kicks where we can."

Detecting seriousness, I sigh. "Kyle, is this some sophisticated form of cruel mockery my mind is too feeble to comprehend? I've been acting like a spoiled petulant brat pretty much full time for going on a year now. There's been plenty to be smug about, if that's what you're looking for. Mine has not been the behavior of one deserving admiration. I have no where to be knocked down from."

Kyle shrugs. "Oh, I don't know. You haven't killed Celery, Saul or yourself. I'd say you've displayed the patience and restraint of a Saint."

I stare at him blankly.

"I'm serious."

"That's what I find so disturbing." I respond flatly.

His eyes go frighteningly cold, "Whatever amount of it you've been responsible for yourself you've still gone through hell this year. And despite all that and every time you've failed or been failed, you're still here, trying to work things out. You've forgiven more that I thought Celery was ever capable of requiring and instead of giving him the ultimatum I'd have to say I think he richly deserves, you spent the week trying to adapt yourself to this new life he started on the sly and get to know his friends. That you only punched one of them who from Celery's reports has a mouth that gets him into fights every other week would once again fall under "restraint of a Saint" category in my book."

I blink. "Restraint of a Saint rhymes, did you notice that?"

"It wasn't intentional, but yes, I did notice."

"I love a good unintentional rhyme."

"I know you do Carrots."

About that time it occurs to us that Celery and Jonas have been gone longer than could generally be considered reasonable for a trip to buy four veggie burgers (lunch!) and another round of Jones Orange Cream Soda, so we get up and mosey over to the front counter, where we fully expect to find Jonas and Celery. And we do. The part that comes as something of a surprise is that Celery is on the phone having a conversation that at first glance appears to involve a great deal of getting interrupted and heavy sighing. When he sees me he actually looks relieved, shoving his cell phone at me saying, "Here, it's Saul."

Mystified, I put the phone to my ear. "Buddy?" Notice my masterful use of irony.

"So I hear you punched Jay in the mouth."

Ah. "Yeah, I did." Not sure what else to say.

"Totally understandable we've all been there. What I'm checking about is if this was a `jay is a mouthy punk, loveable only if you're Celery and here we define Celery as `insane, often a very poor judge of character and possibly blinded by the worship in Jay's eyes' kind of punching, or a `you know who deserves a good punching? Jared, that's who. But damnit, he's all the way over there... oh hey, Jay punch!' type situation. I'm guessing it was the latter, but wanted confirmation."

I resist the urge to punch the air. "I knew you would understand!" Which, take a beat to yet again love the irony.

"We dislike Jared for the same reason we dislike each other except possibly more cause "

"He's a total poser?"

"Exactly."

"So, is that all you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Yep."

"Okay then."

"See you around."

I take a moment to try to figure out how to turn off Celery's phone, and then give up and hand it back to him. This is when I notice that he's staring at me quite as though one would stare at someone who has spontaneously grown several extra heads. A moment later I notice the same looks on Kyle and Jonas's faces.

I do one of my patented frustrated noises at the back of my throat before saying, "Relax guys. It was just a civil conversation it's not like we're going to pick out curtains and a china pattern you know?"

They all seem to feel continuing to stare at me is the best way to respond to this. I do the angry noise again, and then sigh.

"Let's just move on shall we?"

My motion meets with no resistance, and we get the food Jonas and Celery never got around to and then return to the table. After all the food is gone and Jonas gets his second bonus Yatzee of the game, I'm feeling just bored and spiteful enough to say, "So, did you guys decide what you're going to do about the Parental Factor?"

Jonas shifts in his chair, but Kyle answers promptly. "As yet, the house is divided. 50% voted for groveling and submission to wrath in hopes of maintaining peace, while the other 50% put out a strong motion in favour of putting a permanent end to cowering under tyranny and hurting those who truly love you in favour of said tyrants. Guess which side I voted for?"

There's a shocked pause before I sputter, "Jesus Kyle, maybe you should have punched Jay too. It works wonders for the old pent up reserves of hostility."

Jonas is up and running from the table a second after these words pass my

lips and there's barely a gap measurable by known units of time to before Celery is fixing Kyle to the table with a look and jumping up after him. Once Celery too has disappeared out the deli doors, Kyle's shoulders sag and his face crumples.

"It's been a banner year for us Vasskez brothers, hasn't it?"

I'm without a sarcastic or witty quip this time around so I just reach over and grasp his hand across the table. We stare at each other bleakly, and we're still doing so when Celery and Jonas come back nearly 20 minutes later. Jonas's jaw is set and his eyes bright, determined.

Kyle is visibly lost for words. Just when I think an apology might be creeping onto his lips, Jonas cut him off with an impatience wave of his hand.

"Look, no one's saying you're wrong okay?" A crack in his armor forms, but he keeps most of the emotion out of his voice. "It's just that this is just isn't one of those time where logic applies."

Kyle's choice of response is breathtaking in it's simplicity as he holds up his arm and Jonas bites back relief as he rushes to take the invitation and slides into the booth beside Kyle under said arm. Just as Celery's taking his seat next to me, Kyle presses his lips to Jonas's ear, and whispers something that sounds suspiciously like, "I'm sorry anyway goldie." But, after he does he goes back to looking stoic and vindicated, so that's just a theory.

Most of the charm of endless games of Yatzee is lost in the wake of such things, and following along with conventional wisdom we put a stop to it, settle our bill and roll out (in the Le Baron). Suitably exhausted after such a whirly-gig of fun as the past few days have been, I fall asleep not long after getting into the car and curling up on Celery's conveniently located shoulder.

When I open my eyes, he's smiling at me.

"What?" Suspiciously.

"Nothing. I'm just happy."

I push myself up into a sitting position, eyeing him with heightening alarm. "Why?"

He shrugs. "Because why shouldn't I be? You're here! You're beautiful and you're mine and you're HERE. What right do I have to be unhappy?"

"After all, you're young and free in Canada!"

"Exactly."

I nod. "Okay. I'm in. I'm on the joy train." And grin.

He sighs.

"Well it won't work now."

"Why not?" I sputter.

"Because these things have to be spontaneous."

"It was your idea!"

"It wasn't an idea it was an emotion." But what you have to pay attention to are the corners of his mouth, and how he's working hard to stop them from turning up into a stupid grin.

"You're ridiculous."

He loses the battle and grins. "Whatever."

I kiss him, and for a minute things are so simple again. Celery threads our hands and I settle against him. For the first time in too long, life is perfect, because we're together.

"Clearly that goat idea of yours was much better than I realized." Which is his way of letting me know he feels it too.

"See?" Triumphant. "You scoffed but now you see how brilliant it was."

"I think we should do it. Scout ourselves a nice cave somewhere, steal some goats. It'll be perfect. Just us."

"No one else."

I pause.

"Of course, you'll have to do all the work."

"What work?"

"Oh you know all the manly woodsmen work... log cutting and animal slaying and so on."

"And what will you do?"

"Lounge about on furs strewn about the cave floor and wait around for you to come home and ravish me."

He laughs and kisses my shoulder. "What about the goats baby?"

"Oh well, I assumed they'd just take care of themselves. Goats are very industrious you know."

"I thought going to the mountains and raising goats was the whole point?"

"Maybe in your scenario. I like mine better."

He kisses me again, on my neck this time. "Me too."

"So it's settled. We're to run away and become inattentive goat herdsman."

"Best men in the woods."

"Can we live one forest over?" Jonas wants to know.

I almost jump, as this question is the first reminder I've gotten since waking that we still happen to be in the Le Baron, meaning along with Kyle and Jonas. Not that I would have conducted myself differently if I'd remembered sooner, nor am I embarrassed now. It just startled the fuck out of me. Still, I have to grin, once I've recovered, as this question of this surely implies some sort of victory for my eldest brother.

"Absolutely. We'll take epic once a year hikes over to your cave and give you goats to bless your home. It'll be great!"

Kyle refrains from loudly protesting, but has this to say, "Jonas recognize that I'm going to require that we have some sort of electoral slash plumbing system hooked up in our cave."

Jonas gives him a confident thumbs up. "Recognized."

"We better look into something like that for ourselves." I mention to Celery.

He nods. "I'll get right on that."

After a long silence of silence set off only by the hum of the car and the distraction of passing cars I venture, "Could anyone see themselves being even vaguely enthusiastic about putting the drunks to bed and confronting our real fears instead?" Am I the only one who wishes Doug would have let the Bonaduces rest in peace instead of reanimating the corpse and calling it The Paperbacks? (This is a related topic if you're aware that what I just said was partly a quote from the Bonaduces song).

But back to matter at hand. Which would primarily be the resounding lack of answer to my question by all concerned. I'd criticize, but I'm not exactly tripping over my pylons of desire to go through anymore emotional Olympics myself just yet.

"I'm up for mentioning that we should probably call mom and dad one of these days. To, you know, let them know we're all still alive and what the plan is."

I'll get to the second part as soon as there is one. "No one's called them yet? At all? Jesus they're probably in the midst of a massive search and rescue mission as we speak!"

"Chill Winston. I called them but only once well, twice. The morning we got there and then again that night, to say we would be staying for awhile. I told them I'd call them again once I knew how long that would be, but I don't really yet. Still, no one's going to be releasing a fleet of hounds following the sent they picked up from getting up close and personal with one of your socks any time soon."

"Even so."

"Lecture me on correct parent/son relations Carrots. See how fast it gets you kicked out of the car."

Jesus. And here I thought Kyle was the last safe place I had left. The one relationship I was sure I hadn't (and could not) screw up.

I opt quickly to take the not getting kicked out of the car route, "Yeah. Sorry."

Kyle lets me off easy with a slightly embarrassed smile. "I sort f didn't mean for it to come out that way."

"Probably best that it did. I need to be reminded of the people I have to make stuff up to, the work that needs to be done if I want things to get better. Because you know, I do, and they will." It ends up sounding more commanding than you might think.

>From his seat beside me in the back of the Le Baron Celery's looking tense and startled. Maybe because nothing's been resolved between us, or that we seem to be far too good at instantly tearing any resolutions down. I meet his gaze steadily.

"I want things to be better. All the things in my life. I need them to be, because they can." While not spoken, the implication is clear. It's time to move on. Pick up the pieces, sort through the wreckage, salvage

what I can and throw away the rest. It may be simply my most recent epiphany borne life change decision of many, but it's my favourite, and I'm determined to do this. To make the necessary changes. With or without him. (I'm almost brave enough to mean it.)

"I think I like this talk better when it was about goats." Jonas cuts weakly through the nearly audible tension following my declaration.

At Jonas's words Celery's eyes break from mine, and settle determinedly out the window. I keep looking at him, watching his Adam's apple move as he breathes heavily and takes deep reaching swallows. This goes on until we reach Saul's house, and I have time to wave good night to Kyle and Jonas hastily after I get out of the car and follow Celery's rapidly receding back into the house.

We lie down together and he closes his eyes tightly. I listen to his breath waiting for it to go from ragged to smooth or give me some other kind of sign.

When he opens his eyes, they're blazing brightly. "I'm so angry."

I reach up, and brush rebel strands of hair out of his eyes.

"I know."

The softness of my gaze eventually breaks him, and Celery dissolves into tears, angry and broken.

"I wanted to hold onto your forever."

I want to beg him with every ounce of strength in my body to understand that he still can, to make him see that despite all our changes we still belong primarily in each others arms. But I say nothing, knowing it is a decision he must arrive at on his own. In the place of pleading words what I offer up as persuasion are my hands around his face, my legs across his as I straddle his body and look down at him with tear soaked eyes.

"I am here," I whisper. "Here in your arms. But for no longer than it fails to cause you pain."

At this, his hands, which had hitherto lain limp at his sides, come up and grip my own.

"I told you, I mean, that what I've been trying to tell you anyway. It doesn't matter that I've found happiness without you happiness with you is the only kind I care to have. You are the thing that I trust... you will always be one who saved me. For that and for everything that you now are, I will always love you." It's two plus two equaling four, it's

gravity. Trusted, accepted, but infinitely comforting at the right times.

I kiss him fiercely, possessively. "That goes for me too all of it. If you ever doubt that again doubt US again I may be forced to kill you." It's scary cause it's true.

He nods. "Okay."

I'm brave enough for the next bit now. "I need you to come home."

Confusion... reluctance... shadows of too many doubts to name.

"This isn't who you are," brushing my fingers against his lips, our faces still close enough to be almost touching, his eyes almost the sum of what I can see. I have to draw away from this tantalizing closeness to be able to say the rest of it. "Or it is," I shrug heavily. "And if that's the case, the person I love doesn't exist anymore." And either way, I have to leave. It's just a question of whether or not he'll come with me.

Without a moment's hesitation, he places his hand against my (pounding) heart. "I'm right here baby." Against my sob of relief he murmurs, "And I promise this time I'm staying, okay?"

I nod brokenly and allow myself the luxury of falling sobbingly into his open arms.

Carrots and Celery Part Three Chapter Thirty
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
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If this were a movie and not my life, the story would have ended there. But this is, for better or for worse, not a movie with all the convenience of fading to black and the soothing melody of some too perfect love song. All moments end, and so was the fate of the one you just recently witnessed. After my tears were washed away by Celery's gentle words and grounding touches the sun was making its presence known and we were still in his bed in Calgary, it was the last day of my visit, and we still had lives outside that room. And as much as I want him to come with me, reality is sinking in.

I start to force myself to doff the last remnants of this peace I've been lulled into, and begin shifting against him, but Celery stops my movements with a pleading hand.

"Don't." He whispers.

"Don't what?"

"Don't wake up. If we keep our eyes closed we can stay here forever."

I press my face against the crook of his neck and try to believe it's true.

"I have to go..."

Already I don't know what I'm going to do about all the school I've missed, a problem so late in the year, and just the beginning of all the things I have to sort through when I get home. My ineffectual worry for the twins and the way I didn't even tell Colin that I was leaving.

"I'm coming with you."

Despite the fact that I was present in the conversation we had that involved me mentally begging him to come home with me, that was Fantasy Land Carrots. This is Realty Carrots.

"You can't... you have to finish school. I know I... and you ARE coming home, just not yet. You have to finish school first." Reality Carrots understands the virtue of a high school diploma. Isn't he practical?

"You're more important than that."

I have to laugh at this, because even though I can't allow him to actually do that, I've been waiting for him to say it.

"Celery, no."

"I'm not risking us again Carrots. I can't even lose a second with you baby, everything else is secondary after that."

I kiss him, my lips already shaking slightly from held back tears.

"I won't deny that I needed to hear that, but hearing it I believe it, and that's enough for me. I like grand sweeping romantic gestures, and I think along with some further scheduled groveling you could fit a few of them in, but this can't be one of them. This fucking year Celery... all we've suffered for it... if you don't even finish school, then the whole thing is a waste, a bust. I can't get out of this barely alive without anything to show for it."

"Carrots," He says slowly, carefully. "Haven't you noticed that I haven't been going to any classes all this week?"

Now that you mention, yes, I did notice that.

"I sort of just assumed you were skipping, like I am. Is that not... am I wrong?"

"Well no... or yes."

I raise my eye brows, silently requesting him to vague that up a little.

He frowns a sigh.

"In the first months that I got here the not talking to anyone really lent well to working ridiculously hard in school. I sort of lost myself in it, you know?" I recall doing to same. "Anyway, I took a bunch of extra courses, and they were mostly just the one semester long, but I took a double load, so I finished a whole years worth of electives in January. The core subjects Applied math and English run all year, so I'm still technically taking them, but I'm done my term papers and all that's really left to do in Math as well as English are the Provincial Exams at the end of May. I could come back for those, and still come home now."

I process as this for a moment, head bowed.

"This just occurred to you now?"

"Well..."

And there's the anger, "Cause, I tell you... I'm finding it extremely interesting that you're saying all this now, seeing as when you came during

your Mythical Calgary Spring Break you gave me no indication you were ready to come home even if it was possible, which I recall receiving the distinct impression that it was not."

The apology in his eyes begs for a chance to explain,

"When I got back I fell back into everything as if I'd never left. And nobody questioned me about it. I thought they were just giving me time but the truth was they didn't notice. I care about them and they care right back but it isn't ME they love. I'm not John Snider mall employee and snow boarder extraordinaire. I'm not the guy who's okay on his own and doesn't mind that he's totally alone. I bleed when I'm away from you and I feel it every second. I realized all that I knew that it was time to make a change. So I talked to my teachers and stopped sleeping for awhile to finish the year end projects. My academic brilliance and heart felt sob story won out over bureaucratic red tape and murmurs about special treatment," He shrugs. "Actually, I think mostly it was my association with Saul that did it. He's their shining star probably going to the States for University I believe Princeton is already sniffing around."

He meets the disbelieving look in my eyes with pleading in his.

"I wanted to come home the second I knew it was possible, but I wasn't brave enough to assume I was welcome at least not without giving some warning first. I e-mailed you about it," He shakes a little. "I'm guessing it was about an hour after you guys got on the road to come here."

I shut my eyes, and let the heartbreak and bafflement fall over me. And when my body starts to shake and the wetness starts blinking out of my eyes, I let him hold me.

Anger returns following this release, and I shove him away.

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before now? What the hell have we been doing this week Celery?"

"I didn't want... I wanted to try to earn some of the forgiveness you seemed to be offering just by showing up. I felt like telling you about the e-mail and everything would be like..." He shrugs. "Cheating."

I laugh hoarsely. "Cheating?"

His awareness concerning the lunacy of this is expressed in a grimace. "Also, I was afraid."

"That I wouldn't want you?" The Molotov cocktail of disgust and disbelief.

"That I'd changed too much to be what you wanted anymore. That I was

fooling myself into believing I'd ever been anything but John or ever could be again."

After another wave of held back tears that's not entirely successful, I shake my head. "God I'm so sick of crying," Wiping my eyes furiously.

"We should really start to do something else." He notes in affirmation.

"Like what?"

"I don't know... random acts of violence?"

I chuckle a bit through my remaining tears. "Can't we just stop doing stuff to each other that causes the need in the first place?"

He comes over and takes me in his arms. "I'm all for it baby. I'm just not entirely sure how to go about it."

"I think we're back to my goats plan again."

He kisses my forehead. "It was a good plan."

I lean in to his touch. "Or we could just do a lot more of this," I sigh shakily. "I want my life to have this again Celery I want it to be me and you again. I need us to be okay. I need to laugh with you and talk with you and wake up beside you and I need to trust that I'll always have that."

My face in his hands, I'm kissed again, on my lips this time. Firmly and full of promises of forever.

"I'm coming with you. We're going to pack my bags and call Jonas and Kyle to let them know to expect an extra passenger for the journey home and then I'm coming with you."

"Celery..."

"What?"

"Don't play with me, please."

"I'm not. I'm coming with you. Why don't you believe me?" Searching for the sources of my distress so he can attend to them, so much like old times.

"You left saying you couldn't stay. Saying that if you did it would just mean us falling back into old patterns of supposed badness and all that. You LEFT. And now suddenly I'm supposed to believe you're ready to turn around, forget everything you've previously said about the need to see your time here through, and come back with me?"

"Yes." And the way he says it, I almost do.

"What about your friends, your job, Saul and his mother. You have a life here that was important enough to you to run away from me for... you expect me to just readily accept you're willing to just give all that up?" Because doubt is so easy to cling to.

"I guess what I hope if not expect is that I haven't damaged what we have to such an extent that you no longer believe that I'd happily give anything and everything up if it means keeping or even just pleasing you." His voice is subtly pleading.

"I don't want us to..." I shake my head. "I want us to be better people than we've been, I want to be able to stop demanding that caring about me the most means you kind of don't care even a little bit about anyone else when the chips are down. And vice versa. If it was just your pals from work it would be easy but Saul as much as I want to throttle the guy every time I see him..."

"I'm not planning on giving him up," Celery says, picking his words with care. "He matters to me, outside of you I'm not sure I've ever gotten so close to someone so fast... maybe not even Jonas. But, Saul knows everything I did, he knows my coming back was just me freaking out and needing to regroup."

"Have you talked to HIM about any of this lately?" Cause in no way did I get the impression that Saul is going to passively accept Celery leaving.

He smiles wryly.

"He told me he calculated the chances of winning a campaign to get me to stay longer or forever and decided it wasn't worth the output of energy."

"So what the hell has he been playing at with me?" Baffled. "Macho head games?"

Celery laughs. "I think that was his way of testing you trying to protect me."

"Terrific." I mutter.

"Baby, we attract the crazies. And frankly, I think that's more your influence than mine, so really, it's all your fault."

I shake my head. "Uh-uh. There's no way you're pinning this one on me. I've never liked math that's all your doing."

"Can we at least agree he's no worse than Colin?"

I raise my eye brows, "Saying his name without spitting blood that's a major accomplishment for you. Would you like a cookie?"

"Do I have to remind you that YOU'RE the one who drew actual blood?"

I wish he hadn't been serious about me never living that one down. "A plague on both your houses."

"I'm pretty sure you live in at least one of them." He reminds me.

"Don't get fresh."

We banter somewhat carefully with each other for awhile, and then Celery employs the wildly successful "kiss him whenever he starts to frown" strategy while performing the necessary (and suspiciously few) activities required to enable him to leave Calgary this very day. This also works well at quelling my 'hey wait a minute when did we even decide I wasn't mad at you anymore and that you were coming back?' rants. It keeps us busy in between all the phone calls and packing and all that good stuff. I find myself again pondering the wonders of ambivalence as it exists in its current form inside me, allowing me to feel fully the blind near hysteric and surely euphoric joy accompanying the phrase "he's coming home!" as it repeats on a continuous loop in my brain, while at the same time in no way silencing or diminishing the feelings of cold panic along with the remaining and approaching habitual stab of anger, this time due to the obvious planning ahead of this venture and the secrets required to make it so. Cheating indeed.

But the immeasurable joy remains in harmonious conflict with those feelings and I spend as much time with a dumb smile on my face as I do attempting to form protests and then getting kissed for it. Helping things along is the shortness of time required for all necessary arrangements to be made and belongings to be packed. Most of his stuff will be left here, agreement found easily according to what the reality of the Le Baron's hauling capabilities dictates. We emerge from his room with only my duffle bag and one stuffed with the essentials for him, and naturally Celery's skateboard.

Saul, almost as inevitably, is waiting outside for us and looks unfazed by the presence of extra baggage and our obvious intentions. I stare at him unnoticed as he and Celery express things to each other that are necessary and unspoken. As I do this, I wonder how I ever thought him to be a gawky, shy and awkward pre-teen with glasses and probably a stutter. My initial impressions of the boy as they came to me by way of short descriptions and anecdotes over the phone seem ludicrously far removed from the confident and ferocious young man who stands before me. And now I understand that there was never really any possibility of him being short of spectacular,

brilliant and dazzling. And that this is quite possibly true for anyone Celery has taken into his heart. Although we can safely consider me left out of that aggregate.

The point is that with the perspective gained only from the safety of the sidelines of victory, I possess the generosity to recognize that this remarkable and infuriating human being served as the glue my most treasured companion so desperately required to be held together these past months. I'm able to see him finally as a compatriot in the ongoing struggle to keep Celery happy and sane instead of as an adversary.

It's in the spirit of this new perspective that I'm reminded of something I set out to do a long time ago and I take a breath before raising my eyes to face him.

"This might seem like smug victorious bastardry, but I honestly don't mean for it to be. This is just something I promised myself I'd do along time ago and whatever issues I have with you now, I still really appreciate how you took care of him and well," I psyche myself up with a sharp inhale and then hug Saul, quickly but firmly.

Once I've let him go and we're facing each other again, Saul keeps his face impassive, but nods slightly, and I feel like maybe we're finally on our way to making peace with each other. Kind of inevitable I suppose, seeing as how we're apparently doomed to be apart of each others lives.

Celery ducks his head and tries not to beam at this exchange, and we roll our eyes in tandem. I smile slightly. I'm beginning to think of the eye rolling as our thing.

A moment later I hear the faint and familiar sound of the Le Baron's pathetic excuse for a horn and I break away from Celery and Saul to open the door. Kyle is already jogging up the walk and Jonas is following him closely.

I wave automatically, but they've already stopped short, ignoring me completely, choosing instead to stare past me at Celery. I turn back to see what all the fuss is about, and seeing him as they are, I understand.

At his feet sits Celery's bugling duffle bag, his backpack is slung over his shoulder and in his opposite hand, he's gripping the nose of his skateboard, holding it firm against his leg. The orange hat is sitting comfortably on his head, looking as if it'd never left.

They continue to stare and blink. Calling Kyle about the extra passenger is the one call Celery never got around to making.

"You got room for one more?" He says eventually, his ludicrously out of

place casual tone breaking the tension of this moment.

"Why not?" Kyle's tones matching his, and he adds an unconcerned shrug.

"I figured it was no big deal, since we're all going to the same way anyway." I add with infinite blas .

Jonas looks like he wants to say something about cursed Vasskez insanity but Kyle flashes momentary puppy dog eyes, which doesn't fail to melt Jonas into a willing puddle, but does make him laugh, so it's a victory all the same.

Time is taken then for Saul and Celery's more extended good byes, which Kyle, Jonas and I leave them to, the excuse being that we want to start packing the car, and have to rearrange some stuff to make room for Celery.

The ride home goes something like this:

Jonas and Celery (the only one who can still stand to play with him) have a travel Yatzee tournament while Kyle and I engage in another Lord of the Rings quote-off. We plan ahead for the day when we will speak only in Lord of the Rings quotes for an entire day, and Jonas and Celery (who have failed to get quite as obsessed we us) protest loudly. I tell them Gondor has no King, and that Gondor needs no King, and this shuts them up.

When it starts getting super warm and we try to turn off the heat, we discover it's broken in the sense that we can't, so we open the windows and stop for Slurpee's every time we pass a likely looking gas station. At one point Celery ponders taking off his shirt, but Kyle takes advantage of his veto power as owner of the vehicle to 86 the idea, stating that doing so would only lead to badness of a variety too heinous to even speak of.

We serenade each other with off-key renditions of the sappiest love songs and then tease each other about knowing the words. My personal favourite is when Kyle does an impersonation of Jonas singing the theme from the Bodyguard and then Celery does an impersonation of his impersonation. I've recently decided that impersonations of impersonations are the funniest thing to ever happen.

Celery dozes and I poke him sporadically to keep myself entertained.

We spend an hour telling one of those round-robin one word a turn stories, which ends up being primarily about the impossible love between a penguin and a llama, with a few oblique references to the fear we all have of ostriches. They could kill a man!

We have a long and serious discussion about how no one should ever wink, EVER.

Kyle, Celery and Jonas all take turns driving and I narrate along to each of their driving styles whenever I get bored. This happens quite often.

Celery and I have a contest to see which one of us can quote more consecutive pieces of dialog from Clone High (a show we only recently discovered we both love) and I pout extravagantly when Celery wins. This gets me kissed, and I promptly pronounce myself the true champion.

We hear more about a week in Calgary from Jonas and Kyle's point of view, which, oddly enough, involves a thorough and intensive bashing of the movie Ladyhawk, which Kyle and Jonas claim to have been tricked into watching in their hotel room by deceptive childhood memories suggesting they had loved it as lads. I also recall watching it in my youth, and remember this fondly, but Kyle assures me it's a big lie.

"No no! You only think that it's good, but it's NOT. It's awful. I mean, not funny awful either. Well, the music is damn hilarious, cause it's entirely dated and stuck in the 80's "

"And like, who doesn't love the unnecessary busting out of a synthesizer during battle scenes?" Jonas pipes up.

"Also, Matthew Broderick had a few choices lines "

"Oh Louie, I see you're brought your crossbow!" More from Jonas.

"And he lies a lot, for no apparent reason, but really, that was it."

"I tell ya, it still sounds pretty good."

"It wasn't, trust me on this one. It was mildly interesting, but then it was late, and it just didn't stop. Like, for a REALLY long time."

"Yeah."

I glance over at Celery. He's smirking slightly, and it doesn't take me long to figure out why.

"So that was basically the low point of your week? An only mildly entertaining movie that went on too long?"

They consult briefly with mouth quirks and eyebrow raises, and then nod.

"Apart from that fun stuff about Jonas's parents? Yeah, that was about it." Kyle confirms.

Celery and I high five.

"Still the champs."

Jonas spends an hour talking only in NADSAT, until Kyle threatens to throw him out of the car, using perfect NADSAT himself.

Banished to the back of the car with me following this event, Jonas challenges me to a rock-paper-scissors death match and our respective victory chants lead Celery to crank the volume of the country station he diabolically turned to until we shut up.

We conspire quietly, formulating our revenge, and put salt and vinegar in both Celery and Kyle's drinks the next time we stop for food.

Kyle protests loudly about having no part in the country and being made to suffer for it anyway, but we simply give each other pounds and tell Kyle to quit bitching in our ears.

Jonas sleeps.

We take turns giving each other super powers and super hero personas, and after eliminating the possibility of making me a crime fighting vegetable with the ability to make people see better, the car unanimously votes to make me a super onion with the ability to make others cry on command.

In an uncharacteristic flash of seriousness, we discuss summer jobs and what we soon to be high school graduates might take in University in the upcoming year, but stay a safe distance away from the logistics and reasons for Celery's return.

Jonas talks vaguely about moving into his own apartment when he starts University, and I manage to not have a panic attack when Kyle makes noises about living there with him. Celery's hand gently squeezing my knee helps me in this endeavor.

Taking a break for some quality time at the side of the road, Kyle and Jonas abandon us in favor of pie while Celery and I opt to simply sit on the curb outside of the diner within which they will attempt to procure said pie.

"Remember when we were little?"

"No." It's sarcasm with half the effort.

"When I was sad or frightened even when I thought I was doing a good job at hiding it you'd know and you'd hug me and I remember thinking other than, you know 'I'm 7!' 'it's better now'. And it always was. Because as long as I was close to you I felt strong enough to face any challenge and

meet any obstacle. It was so simple back then." I sigh. "Why can't it be like that anymore?"

He kisses my head. "That rhetorical?"

"No. Practical. I still feel that way, except I'm not seven anymore so now I've got this 18-year-old brain telling me it's absurd."

"Well, I remember you being a very mature seven." He says this like its comfort, while a smirk teases the corners of his lips.

"Oh god, I was such a brat."

He laughs. "I loved it though. You were always running your mouth off and I got to sweep in and save the day."

"Yeah, you never really got over that did you?"

He smiles ruefully. "No, I really didn't."

"I love you for it though, same as I did back then."

He looks away. "Sometimes I think it's done you more harm than good."

I catch his chin and force Celery to look at me. "We've hurt each other, it's true. Being together has shaped up both in not universally positive ways but I shudder to think of the way I'd be without you. You taught me the part about embracing the capacity for total unconditional love not the selfish possessive parts. That's human weakness stuff I think. There have to be some drawbacks to loving this strongly, and for us it's that we get blind to anything and everyone else sometimes. But I would never want to change a thing if it would mean knowing you a fraction less well, and no hurt will ever change how lucky I know I am to be yours."

His eyes meet mine and I know we've returned, finally, to a time where simple actions are enough, because he smiles softly, and holds out his arms.

Back on the road Jonas and Kyle prove that IS in fact possible to talk about the virtues of pie for over half an hour without once being kidding while Celery and I demonstrate the effects of this on those who are subjected to such an in-depth discussion by banging heads against our windows.

Kyle sleeps.

Most of the journey through Saskatchewan consists of an extremely long game of Identify that Farm Crop, which no one wins, cause none of us are ever

actually sure who's getting things wrong or right.

Jonas slips on the floor in the latest roadside dinner we visit, but Kyle catches his arm and steadies him before he falls. Though Jonas is perfectly unhurt and unaffected by this event, Kyle takes a minute to freak out (I'm guessing for reasons that have more to do with the recent history that any imagined implications of falling on the floor of a strange diner somewhere near the Saskatchewan/Manitoba border) and press his face into the dreads Jonas has now vowed not to cut. When Jonas laughs and says, "I'm fine dude", he gets kissed soundly and we have to quickly exit the dinner to avoid the staring by the local patrons and truckers. All in all, a find moment in roadside history.

Taking a break from the array of death cab, Weakerthans and other sad bastard music I've helpfully provided, we listen to the radio and hum along to Complete Me by Serial Joe without irony and silently agree not to make fun of each other for it later.

I get my lounge on in the back seat, my legs sprawling over an unresisting Celery, and Jonas complains that when they were sitting in the back Kyle didn't let him do the same. Kyle points out that the reverse is also true and Jonas responds by hitting Kyle in the arm. That's what he gets for attempting to use logic in an argument, I say.

We discuss the many virtues of saying `eeevil' over simply `evil' and also argue the logistics of only ever finishing a sentence with `as it were'.

Kyle and I spend a good 20 minutes outlying the many pieces of evidence indicating that Legolas and Aragorn are clearly shagging each other blind while Jonas looks on with mild horror and at one point mutters something to Celery about distinctly remembering that Kyle was a lot more manly before they started getting down. Which, yeah, I didn't need to hear about.

Upon hearing Kyle's and my worries about the twins Celery joins us in pumping Jonas for information, which he is largely unwilling to give. All he'll tell us is that they're `okay, mostly' and that we should really ask them if we want to know more. Which we're told we should, and he follows this with a pointed look that works nicely at making us all feel guilty.

We round back onto lighter topics with another rousing round of "these are the Dave's I know", which is a game I suppose you really have to be Canadian and kind of weird to know about, but pretty much all the cool people I know are weird and Canadian, so that's all I care about.

We all verbally stone Jonas when he tries to read The Iliad in the back instead of joining us in a round robin verbal rock paper scissors tournament, but when he starts reading passages like, "Menelaus of the great war cry", aloud our resolve weakens and the tournament eventually

falls apart in favour of a little Story Time with Jonas.

Not long after this, the road starts to stretch out before us in a way that seems more daunting and endless than it has before, and when the Mogwai starts to play and I'm tired and worn in the backseat of the Le Baron, Celery's shoulder is there for me to lean on.

When we pull up into the driveway, I can almost convince myself that this is just us, the four brothers, returning home on a Sunday evening like any other. I can imagine away the cramped legs and luggage and pretend that we've come from a movie for a BDI run instead of hundreds of kilometers away. I can act as if there was never a time when Celery's hand on my knee would be unexpected or in doubt and I can push away all the strangeness of the uncertainty coloring his eyes.

I can sit under the canopy of spring leaves with the boy I've always known and the man I love and embrace this moment, everything that it is and everything we've left behind along the way. I can take what's been saved and treasure it, and I can find places in my heart for what is new. I can fight and scratch and yell and still know that this will be mine for the rest of my life. This hand in mine, this person beside me, these feelings wondrous and terrifying coursing through me.

We stare at each other for awhile, there in the back seat of the Le Baron, long after Jonas and Kyle sprung from the car, desperate for fresh air and leg room, until a slow smile begins to form on Celery's lips, and mine are all too eager to follow.

"Well," He says with a peaceful sigh, "I'm back."

The end