

Bouquet
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Bouquet
by Kody Boye
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The man stands at the register buying flowers for his boyfriend.

"They're beautiful," the clerk says. "Who are they for?"

In this socially-oppressed, medieval-minded neighborhood, you can't get away with being gay, so he lies. With his tongue in cheek and his eyes clear, he simply replies, "For my girlfriend," with his face straight as ever. He thinks it's ironic that he just thought that, but he tries to push the sentiments aside. Calling his boyfriend a 'she' doesn't further diminish his masculinity, as there is a 'he' in the 'she,' so there isn't anything to worry about, right?

"Have a good day," the clerk says, passing money into the man's hand.

He nods and leaves.

He drives home with his hands on the wheel and his mind in the sky. His heart feels as though it will fall out of his chest and it aches like it's been struck with a metal hammer. *Bang*, he imagines, it crushing his ribcage and hitting his soul, and *boom* he thinks, for he has just delivered upon himself a horrible realization.

It is their three-year anniversary.

He and his boyfriend have been together for longer than most straight couples have.

It's all right, he thinks, looking down at the flowers in the passenger seat. *He'll like them.*

Michael has always liked flowers. He said when he was a little boy that he wanted to run down the aisle when his mother married his stepfather, that he was the one who wanted to cast the flowers and not a little girl. But Michael was told that he couldn't because he was a little boy and not a little girl, and in that statement his life had been changed, his future sealed in this place of nothing and hate.

Shaking his head, he pushes his foot down on the accelerator and tries not to think about just what it is that's haunting him.

"Jim," Michael says as he opens the door.

"Happy anniversary."

He presents the roses as though they are nothing more than trinkets, fake gold in a quarter machine. However, despite their cost, and despite their commonly-held, feminine sentiments, it is Michael's smile that forces a grin across his own face as his boyfriend takes the flowers in hand and holds them as if they're the most precious thing in the world.

"I... I don't know what to say," Michael says, turning his eyes up to face him.

"Then don't say anything," Jim replies.

He leans forward.

The rose bears its thorn.

Blood falls onto Michael's perfect white skin.

"Jim," Michael says, reaching down to take his hand. "You're hurt."

"No I'm not," he replies.

When Michael frowns, he offers nothing more than a smile.

Somehow, Michael finds the means to smile too.

They watch TV by the light of the bedside table lamp. Light cast across the room and painting the room in beige, it seems as though the TV cannot speak and is instead made to cast its own light as well. Jim tries to watch it, but he can't help but look down at Michael, who is cradled in his arms as though there is nothing wrong in the world. He is a child, Jim knows, of their generation, of their socially-oppressed and horribly-depressed kind.

Hold him, he thinks. *It's the only thing that helps.*

Outside, a neon sign covers a brick wall that would have otherwise been the only thing there. The curtain is drawn, but still Jim can see it, shining through the curtain like it's a devil hidden in a fruit bowl.

Its V its beard, the A its face, the devil smiles in shades of red, white and blue, completely patriotic in semblance to their lives which are nothing but ordinary.

"Jim," Michael says.

"Yes?" he replies.

"Are you all right?"

He wants to say he is fine, that nothing is wrong and that there is nothing that can hold him from the happiness he so desperately wants to have, but he can't. For some strange, horrible reason, his tongue is silent, as though the cat has caught it and made it its canary.

What do I say, he thinks, to someone who doesn't know?

So innocent Michael is that half the time, he doesn't even realize there is a slip within his mind, a stutter within his voice or the pain within his skull. Headaches bloom there often, wicked flowers meant to show him the meaning of the world, but still Michael doesn't notice. Sometimes, it makes him so mad that he wants to bash his skull into the wall in a fake attempt at trepanation, and other times, it makes him want to swallow as many Advil as he can manage. However, he always does neither, because he does not want to hurt not only himself, but his boyfriend, the one he loves so much.

"I'm fine," he finally decides to say, drawing his boyfriend close. "Don't worry about me."

They continue to watch the TV as though there is nothing wrong in the world.

Proclamation is king, and when the devil says AIDs, it automatically points to them. *The gay disease*, they call it, *the thing that the homosexuals are made of*.

"All you have to do is be around them to get it," some preachers say, then spread their arms to their communion. "All it takes is one simple step."

Once, when Jim was late to come home, Michael had called his workplace and asked if everything was all right. Up until that time, his boy hadn't been aware of the existence of a young man named Michael and had asked Jim about it, to which he simply replied, *It's my brother*.

His boss didn't buy it.

They had moved the next town over shortly thereafter.

As Jim watches the TV in the kitchen with his shirt halfway done-up and toothbrush in his mouth, he tries to avert his eyes as the man on the screen continues to speak about the AIDs epidemic. They say that people are dying, that gay men are spreading disease because of drug use and unprotected sex. They say they don't use condoms, that they aren't celibate and that they party non-stop. Jim wants to scream, to say that it is all wrong and that it isn't true, but he doesn't want to wake Michael.

His sweet, sweet Michael... how he couldn't live without him.

I work, he thinks, for him.

Automechanics is a manly thing for manly men. He couldn't be gay, his fellow employees say, because he's under the hood of a truck, because his jeans are stained with grease. It is the one thing that keeps them alive at night and food on the table.

"Jim," Michael calls.

He shuts the TV off with a simple click of the switch. "Yeah?" he asks.

"Are you going to work today?"

"Almost," he says, then frowns. Almost? *Almost?* What is he thinking? Of course he's going to work. "Yeah," he says, raising his voice over the sound of the toothbrush raking across his teeth.

"Will you come here for a second?"

Jim doesn't think he can bear it, especially after what he's just watched on TV, but he spits the toothpaste in the sink and turns toward the bedroom, swallowing what he couldn't spit out without a second thought.

As he passes into the bedroom, he expects Michael to be out of bed—awake and fully dressed. Instead, he finds the precious being he has so devoted himself to, naked and with the sheet only barely covering himself.

"Yeah?" he asks, leaning into the threshold.

"I just wanted to say I love you before you went."

"Thank you," Jim said.

Little does Michael know that those two words are the only thing that keeps him going during the day.

"Jim," his boss grunts. "You almost done with this car?"

"Yes sir," he replies.

He has been fixing this vehicle for the past four years. Always it ends up with the same problem—a bad carburetor, a slight of the wheel, a bad AC vent. He fixes all of them with little more than a passing thought, as it's his job and it's what he's paid to do, but sometimes he wonders if Mr. McKinny's car is just buying its time before it one day explodes out on the open road.

That, he thinks, would be a sight.

He nods to his boss, bows under the hood of the car, then begins to fix the problem he has fixed ten times before.

He returns home at six in the evening dead tired and covered the grease, so into the shower he goes. His clothes on the floor, his mind in the ground, he barely hears the creak of the door opening, much less feels the press of naked flesh against his.

"Hey," Michael says.

"Hey," Jim replies.

His boyfriend slides his arms around his waist and leans against his back. It is not sex Michael wants when he displays this sort of emotion. No—what he wants is company, as he feels loneliness during the day that Jim can't help abide.

It's all right, he thinks.

His heart wants to break out of his chest. It's a sick thing, a creature of guilt and sorrow, though he knows it is truly his mind who forces him to feel the way he does. A way to a man's heart is not through his chest, but his mind, and were someone to want a direct way to the mind, they might try finding way through his nose, as it's the closest, most direct route to the inside of his head.

"How was work?" Michael asks as the lukewarm water falls on both of them.

"Fine," he says, then thinks to add, "I fixed Mr. McKinny's car again."

"Again?" Michael laughs.

"Again," he nods.

Michael doesn't ask anything further. Instead, he tightens his hold around Jim's midsection and presses his body against him.

In that moment, Jim can't help but feel sorrier than he already does.

He lays awake. Like he often does during the night, he ponders on life and just what is happening around him. He doesn't believe in God, as it's too complicated with the church in such an uproar, and it's not worth it to try and wish for better things, as ninety-five percent of his check goes into rent, utilities and living, so most of the time, he lays there and tries to imagine just what the future would be like.

It may be great, he sometimes thinks, or it may be dastardly horrible.

He can't imagine a future with anything good in it, at least not in the foreseeable distance. He's been trying to shave away the block of indifference with the change jar he keeps at the side of the door, as he often finds change in the garage, though whether or not he's stealing it is up to anyone's discretion. He doesn't think it'll hurt anyone—a few pennies here, a dime or so there. Some would argue that a dollar could save a child's life in Africa, but with twenty-five cents, they'd still need another seventy-five to get anywhere.

Shaking his head, he begins to make his way out of bed, to get the customary warm glass of milk that usually helps him sleep, but stops when Michael stirs at his side.

Will he wake up? he thought.

It wouldn't matter. Michael knows of his sleeping problems. He won't say a word.

Rising, he makes his way toward the door, but stops before he can do so.

In the bed, Michael turns.
He can feel his boyfriend's eyes on him.
"Jim," Michael says.
"Yeah?" he replies.
"Are you coming back to bed?"
"I will soon," he says, then makes his way out the door.

The milk does little to help him sleep. It seems to upset his stomach, and when he goes through the entire night in rolls of agony and frustration, it is Michael who tells him he should call in sick for work.

"You should," Michael says. "You've been on the toilet all morning."

"Shut up," he says.

When Michael doesn't say anything further, he sighs, knowing that he has crossed a boundary that he knows he shouldn't have broken. He begins to say something, but Michael leans forward and captures his lips before he can finish, an apology not broken, but accepted.

"The boss is a hardass," he says.

"You can't fix cars if your stomach's messed up."

"I know."

"So why not call in sick?"

When his stomach rolls, he decides to do just that.

It is the next day, when he is only barely beginning to feel better and isn't in the bathroom for an extended period of time, that he gets the call.

"I can't keep going without a good mechanic," the boss says.

Jim wants to argue, to say that he has only missed one or two days in the past six months, but he says nothing. His arguments will be futile, his rebuttals unnecessary, and in the end he can do little more than nod.

Michael is standing in the threshold, his arms over his chest, when he hangs up the phone. "What happened?" he asks.

"I just lost my job," he says, then begins to cry.

There seems to be little he can do. One moment he is happy, then the next he is sad. Michael has suggested that he go to the doctor, because they say that massive mood swings can be an indication that something is wrong, but he says no, that everything is fine and that he's just going through a bit of a depression.

That's a medical condition, Michael says.

He doesn't reply.

Seated at the kitchen counter with a newspaper folded out before him and a red marker in hand, he begins to circle jobs that are within his proficiency range, then begins to think about them and just how much money they will have before they run out. He knows it's a couple of thousand, maybe two, and that can keep them fed and in the apartment for at least two-and-a-half months, but until then...

What am I going to do? he thinks, cupping his face in his hands.

Part of him wants to freak out. Another, desperate part wants to cry. Regardless, though, he has to remain strong—if not only for himself, but for Michael, who will surely begin to panic if he sees him crying, just like he always has and does and will until the end of days.

Shaking his head, he picks up the marker and continues to go through the newspaper.

He is there for much of the afternoon. Head bowed, one-year-past-due prescription glasses balancing on the end of his nose, he has gone through much of the paper and has even begun to call a few of the places—the first of which is a lawnmower repair business, while the second in line is a fast food joint. He says he's served as a cook before, that he can flip eggs faster than anyone else in town (he can provide

reference) and that he is more than willing to serve in the food industry if it will help him stay in his home.

The businesses ask for references.

He supplies them freely.

Each person he calls says they will check back with him in the coming days.

He begins to think this is worthless when the fifth person says that.

He lays on the couch with his arm over his eyes. Counting sheep in a feeble attempt to fall asleep, it's one-two-three then three-four-five, six-seven-eight and nine-ten-eleven. When he gets to somewhere within the hundreds, he decides that he will be unable to sleep at this late hour of the afternoon and succumbs to that very notion.

Throwing his legs over the side of the couch, he reaches up to rub the half-sleep from his eyes and sighs when his gaze falls on his boyfriend, who is sitting in the corner of the room reading a hardback.

"Hey," Michael says, when he notices that he has risen. "You all right?"

"I'm fine," he smiles. "Why?"

"Because you're trying to sleep at five in the afternoon."

What more is there to do if I don't have a job?

Choosing to keep his thought to himself rather than risk upsetting Michael, he stands, stretches his arms out over his head, then forces himself to grin when Michael in turn rises and pushes his book back onto the bookshelf. He's always had a problem with not finishing books—he's an avid reader and will devour half of one in an afternoon, but he seems to always put them aside, something he can't help but feel is inappropriate at the time, if only because it makes things seem misplaced. However, instead of dwelling how things seem appropriate or not so much, he steps forward, sets his hand on his boyfriend's shoulders, then draws him forward, into an embrace he can't help but feel is meaningless.

"Michael," he says.

"Yes?" his boyfriend replies.

"Everything is going to be ok. Ok?"

"Ok."

He bows his head into Michael's hair and breathes.

His sleeping habits only continue to decline as the week goes on. First minutes, then hours, then eternity—it seems like he cannot sleep at all, and when Michael finally confronts him with a bottle of Melatonin in hand, he gives in and decides to try to normalize his schedule.

The pill works.

Every night, he's out like a switch, and every morning when it fades away, he's right back up again. Most mornings are spent beside the phone, afternoons with Michael on the couch watching TV or something similar. He tries to introduce new habits into their lifestyle, budgeting accordingly for each time they may possibly go out to dinner, but Michael is afraid. He says so one night just as they're getting ready to go to bed, him with the pill already in his system and less than an hour away from being completely light's out.

'I don't think we should waste any money' are the words that begin the fable conversation.

In pajamas bottoms and little else, he looks upon his near-naked boyfriend with eyes that normally would have been reserved for much more lewd purposes. Though he cannot see it himself, he feels it in the back of his head, as though he's just taken eye drops designed to not only clear his vision, but enhance it. This look—this *thing*—is what makes him feel as though he has just overstepped a boundary that cannot be undone.

"Michael," he says.

The younger man crosses his arms over his chest, sighs, then bows his head. His fair hair falls over his face and covers most of his eyes, shielding him from any indication as to what he's feeling. Jim can already guess most of it—indecision, possibly, maybe even unease. He knows fear lingers there as well,

just under the surface, but it hasn't yet surfaced. Indecision has not yet progressed to unease and unease has not yet fallen to fear. It would take some time before those emotions began to surface.

Reaching forward, he extends his hand to touch his lover's arm, but stops halfway there.

He doesn't want to be touched.

The voice in his head wills him to instead take the blanket and lift it up, if only partially, and crawl into bed, which he does without another word or action.

Michael follows soon after.

As always, Michael falls back against his chest.

Their fingers lace together.

It is when the first notice of rent arrives that he begins to become frustrated. Four-hundred dollars out of their account and with no job in clear sight, he thinks that it is the end of the world until Michael wraps his hands around his shoulders and leans forward to whisper in his ear.

"I'll get a job," he says.

He doesn't want it to come to this. Always he has promised Michael that he would never have to work, that he could leave his past behind and instead recover from the hellish childhood he'd survived. He took medication for such illnesses, for such psychotic episodes that sometimes came in the form of dreams, and for that reason alone, it pained his heart to hear such a confession.

You don't have to, he thinks, but doesn't have the strength to speak.

The one man he truly loves should not have to give up the comfort he's found just because he lost his job.

Is the world wrong, or is it just incredibly painful? He can't be sure. All he knows is that he wants to cry.

"Someone called for you," Michael says.

He's slept in this morning—not, of course, of his own accord. He'd set his alarm to go off at exactly eight AM, but sometime between that and the five minutes that followed, Michael must have risen and turned it off to allow him the solace of sleep. He knew what his partner would say—that it was 'just to let him sleep,' but regardless, he can't think about it. There is something new on the horizon, something that may just get them the money they need.

"Who was it?" he asks.

"A technical college."

A technical college? he thinks, then remembers that he had called a technical company a few days prior.

This school claimed to be the future. Computers, they said, would rule the nineties, then the two-thousands afterward, and that by twenty-ten, every kid in America would own one. They would be small, they claimed, but easy to assemble, and not only by the grace of invention, but the ingenuity of man would this future be grand. They offered a three-year program, along with internship, that could very well secure him a job in the flourish future of computer mechanics.

Is it really worth it though? he thinks, staring upon his boyfriend's face with all the hope in the world.

When he began to calculate the logistics in his head, the pieces began to fall together—first the student loans, which would supplement their income and pay for the rent, then the school and just what it could teach him. If one thought about it for any true, definitive amount of time, they could easily see what it could offer, but would it be worth it to dive in headfirst and risk getting eaten by the sharks?

I did ok in school. Maybe I can get a grant.

He doesn't know the exact percentage he needs to pay for the school, but he knows he could find out. Stepping forward, he brushes past Michael's shoulder, then stops.

In a rough economy, taking a risk could spell the end of them.

"Michael," he says.

"Yeah?" Michael replies.

"I'm not sure if I should go for this."

"I think you should."

"You do?"

"Yeah."

"You read it, didn't you?"

"The clip and the article?" Michael asks, then waits for him to nod before continuing. "Yeah."

"You think it'd be worth it?"

"You're smart, Jim—this may be the best thing for you, but like I said, I can get a job."

"I'm not going to say you have to," Jim sighs, "but I'm not going to say that won't be completely out of the question."

With the statement out of his mouth, he feels as though a thousand-pound weight has just been lifted from his shoulders and replaced by something much more simple and manageable.

He hasn't been to college, technical school or any kind of post-high school program.

If anything were to come of this, at least he could upgrade his résumé.

He sits in the lobby waiting for someone to come and get him—a student, a teacher, a secretary, maybe the Devil Himself. He expects the world to come to an end before anything or anyone comes to greet him, as it seems the clock overhead is simply ticking, but when he hears the door open and a voice beckon him in, he rises, brushes dirt from his workman's jeans and makes his way into the office. There, a man sits with his hands laced together and his eyes set ahead, as though expecting someone further to enter when he himself steps into the room.

"Are you Jim Arnoldson?" the man asks.

"Yes sir," he says. "I am."

"I'm Howard Yearn. I work here at this institute."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

They shake hands and then he seats himself when Howard Yearn gestures to the chair opposite him. The man's eyes are hard, ice-like in their perpetually-hollow pits, and every moment he looks at him feels like a judgment thrust upon him by some higher force.

Is this it? he thinks. Is this the way it works?

He imagined it to be different, a trial and error set in order for the student to leap over it. There should be ropes, he thinks, to climb, and rods upon to jump over. This seems too easy, but then again, it is a technical college. He is no Harvard, no Yale, no Princeton, Columbia or Stanford. Hell—he is barely a man with a degree, a man who barely passed math in high school and who only excelled in English because he for some reason liked to read. This place, this very *school* he now sat in was the bottom of the rung, but it promised something that most other schools couldn't even begin to debate.

"We've reviewed your application request," he says, "and your student loan application has gone through."

"It has?" he asks.

Baffled, he nearly loses his breath, but manages to contain himself as the secretary at the side of the room rises and passes him a piece of paperwork, upon which are figures he can barely begin to process.

Is this, he thinks, but stops before he can finish.

The number of zeros behind the two stop him short.

"Sir," he says, looking down at the piece of paper. "I can really get this much money a month?"

"Of course," the man says. "The government's paying for its future generation of workers. How old are you, Jim?"

"Twenty-four."

"See? You've got a whole life of work ahead of you. Of course your loans would have gone through—that is, if you keep up with the recommended number of hours."

I can do this. I really can.

Nodding, he looks down at the piece of paper, smiles, then tilts his head up at the man he knows will change his life.

In Howard Yearn's eyes, he sees his future.
He can't wait for it.

"How did it go?" Michael asks.

"Fine," Jim smiles, taking his partner into his arms and spinning him about the middle of the living room.

"Jim! Jim! Put me down!"

Unable to contain his laughter, he crushes Michael against his chest, then presses their lips together in a savage kiss. At first Michael tries to shy away, but after Jim calms himself down enough to settle his nerves, Michael accepts the kiss, then pushes Jim away to look him square in the eyes.

"Tell me," he says.

"I got in," he smiles. "I got in, Michael. I got in!"

Michael bursts into tears.

Their future is ahead of them.

Jim begins to attend the technical college with his heart on his sleeve and his hopes in his hands. Not once since high school has he carried a backpack on his shoulders and not even for a second has he contemplated doing homework, but the simple act of waking up in the morning, brushing his teeth, then driving to school has him happier than ever. He makes friends quickly, learns about the inner workings of the newest and future technology, and even begins to construct one of the machines within the first three months of his schooling.

Six months into his life as a technical college student, he begins to realize that this is what he wants to do.

One night, while sitting at the counter doing homework, he raises his eyes to find Michael standing in the kitchen, eating cheese and crackers. He rises and starts for his boyfriend's side, then stops before he can round the counter, when Michael raises his head and looks him directly in the eyes.

Something on his face unsettles him.

"Babe?" he asks. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine," Michael says, shoving the saltine and cheese mix into his mouth. "Don't worry about it."

You always say that when something's on your mind.

Sighing, he braces his hand against the counter and stares Michael in the eyes, begging for a response. When none comes, he rounds the counter, takes two of the crackers in hand, then places a piece of cheese between them, all the while waiting for his boyfriend to speak. It seems as though nothing is going to come out when Michael turns and starts for the threshold that leads into the living room, but when he stops to do what Jim thinks is reconsider his actions, his right hand tightens into a fist hard enough to make the vein in his arm bulge.

"Michael?"

"I'm not used to you being gone so much, that's all."

"I'm gone the same amount of time I usually am," he says, starting toward his boyfriend.

"I know, but..."

"But... what?" he frowns. Unsure how to take his partner's response, he wraps his arms around his shoulders, then pulls him back against his chest, swearing he can hear their hearts beating together when he bows his face into Michael's neck.

Isn't that what they say? That two hearts beat as one?

Either way, he doesn't want them to be individuals—he wants them to be a pair, together, as two people bonding together to create one greater whole.

With that thought firmly in mind, he sighs, takes a deep breath, then backs away, giving Michael just enough space to decide what it is he's going to do.

When Michael turns, Jim expects the worst. However, when he sees the look in his eyes and the curve of a smile on his lips, he knows that things are lighter, the agony distant and the frustration caged within its magical menagerie.

"You ok?" he asks.

"I'm sorry for being so selfish."

"Don't be, babe."

"It's just... I'm used to us spending more time together when you're not gone."

"I know."

"And... I don't know. Maybe I should try to find some new friends, but this town, this place—"

Michael doesn't need to finish, and as he draws away, into a place where his voice is silent but his thoughts are screaming, Jim tries not to remember the horrible abuse his partner not only suffered as a teenager, but as a young adult, when his father whipped him to bits for being gay and his mother smacked him so hard across the face she cracked his lips. The thought, as unsettling as it is, grounds him even further and only confirms his suspicion—this time alone is forcing him to reconsider his past, his notions, and possibly even their future together.

"You're... ok with me going to school," he starts, unsure how to continue. "Right?"

"Of course I am."

"I mean... I know you must be thinking about some things."

"Yeah."

"But you know I love you, right?"

"I know."

"I wouldn't be doing this if we weren't together."

"We weren't?"

"No. I want a future together, baby. I want a future with you."

Michael turns his head up.

When a smile crosses his partner's lips—when his white teeth are revealed and his dimples are shown in all their glory—he knows he has made the right choice.

One year later, he the top of his class. Riding the coattails of his professors, soaring through his homework like mad, he is like an obstetrician aiding not others, but himself. Each of his teachers say that he will go far, that he will be one of the leading men in his field and that, come time for the new millennia, he will be at the top of the career bracket making not tens, but thousands of dollars.

Seated at the kitchen counter with food on the table and more content than ever, he waits for Michael to get out of the shower, all the while scratching numbers into dimensions that serve as the makeup of one of the world's current supercomputers.

This is amazing, he thinks, looking not only at the sheet, but at the book next to him.

Gargantuan in purpose and even greater in scope, the *Computer Sciences* book at his side is his Bible. Though not Catholic, Christian, Lutheran or Baptist, he believes himself to be a religious man based solely on the text within this book. It tells him of the past, the present and not only the foreseeable, but the distant future. It says that every ten years their computer processing power doubles and that by twenty-fifty, they could very well have computers that fit within contact lenses.

Amazing. Just... amazing.

In the distant side of the house, he hears the water turn off and the door close. Shortly thereafter, Michael emerges in a pair of boxer shorts and crosses the room to fetch one of the tacos he brought home for the afternoon's lunch. "Hey," he says, offering him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Hey," he replies.

"More homework?"

"More?" he laughed. "It's never-ending."

"Still," the younger man says, unwrapping the hard shell before him. "It seems like all you're doing lately is homework."

"I've worked my ass off to get straight-As."

"I know. You've earned it."

Smiling, he sets his pencil down, then reaches over to mess with his boyfriend's hair. In response, Michael laughs and opens his mouth to take a bite out of his food.

The sight alone makes him realize just what all he is working for—their present, their future, maybe even a family. He's broached the topic of adopting or maybe even hiring a surrogate, but they haven't talked about it in detail. They're young, not even in their mid-twenties, and can wait for such things as children. Besides—in his current frame of mind, he doesn't think that he would be a capable father, especially not with all the schoolwork he has piled up.

Caring for a baby *and* going to school—he might as well shoot himself in the foot.

Ah well, he thinks. *It's no big deal.*

Taking a bite out of his own taco, he bows his head and continues his work.

"Your grades are impressive," Professor Haldwell says in a meeting after class one day. "You must study quite a bit."

"I do, sir," he replies, sliding his hands into his pockets.

"I never expected this from you, Mr. Arnoldson."

"Thank you."

"Can I be honest, son?"

"Yes sir."

"I thought you were just some dumb hick like most of the other kids here are."

"Sir," he laughs.

"It's true, Mr. Arnoldson. You're one of the brighter bulbs in this group."

"I appreciate the compliment," he smiles, reaching out to shake the man's hand as he offers it. "I'm just trying to work toward a better future."

"You have a girlfriend, son?"

No, he thinks, but his confidence betrays him and he offers a nervous smile. *Not exactly.*

"Something wrong, son?" the professor asks.

He does not trust this man enough to say that he is gay, that he sleeps with another man and that he shares his home with him. That knowledge in itself is enough to place him in an awful predicament. Time and again he has heard of students getting slighted for their accusations, their thoughts, their selves, and he doesn't want to fall into that trap. So, like the honest man that he is, he smiles, shoves his hands in his pockets, then says, "No," because it's the truth—he doesn't have a girlfriend, and though he has a man at home, that is not what the professor has asked.

"Shame," the man replies. "You're a good man."

He'd say thank you if he had the need to.

"How'd school go?" Michael asks.

Ok, he thinks, closing the door behind him.

He doesn't want to broach this topic with Michael, this indecision about their relationship and sharing it publicly. It's too sensitive a topic, too great a risk, so with that in mind, he merely smiles and leans forward to embrace the man he has lived, loved and lied about for nearly four years.

"It went fine," he says, smiling when they break apart. "What about you?"

"I didn't do much," Michael admits.

"That's all right. As long as you've had a good day."

"I have." Michael pauses. His eyes flicker in their sockets. "Jim. I need to tell you something."

"Yeah?" he frowns. "What is it?"

It seems as though there is something thick on the air—tension, thick with meat and juicy beneath. He imagines a knife slicing through the air and killing the millions of particles he knows are there, then it slicing into his partner's chest and killing him on sight. Just the tone of the words makes him feel as though something is wrong.

"Michael," he says, frowning when his partner's smile begins to widen across his face. "What is it? Tell me."

"I got a job."

A job?

Has he heard correctly?

"A job?" he asks, laughing as Michael's smile continues to get wider and wider. "Doing what?"

"Working as a museum tour guide."

"That's great, baby," he laughs, once more taking Michael into his arms. "Where is this?"

"Just down the street."

"So you're the guy that basically leads them through the museum, telling everyone what everything's about?"

"Yeah."

"Oh God, Michael. This is great."

Beyond great, actually—in years past, he thought Michael incapable of even thinking about work, much less attempting to do it. However, despite that, something in his gut tells him his partner is more than capable of doing this.

He's good with people, he thinks, and he knows how to talk about things.

How Michael could go on for hours and hours about something he'd learn. Just the other day, he'd told him almost the entire history of a pharaoh from Egypt and then some. If that wasn't a display of his ability, then he didn't know what was.

Unable to contain his happiness, he pulls Michael into his embrace once more.

Things seem to be going just fine.

"So," Jim says, raising his eyes as Michael steps through the door. "How was your day?"

"Long," Michael replies, "but great."

His boyfriend is wearing a long-sleeved, button-up shirt that bears the local museum's logo on its breast. *Burnet's Bazaar* is home to many things—some mummies, medieval weaponry, pottery, but it is most famously known for its reconstruction of all things Arabian, particularly in regards to their historical reconstruction of one such location it is named for. The fact that Michael is learning to navigate such a place is almost beyond him, but in that regard, Jim stands, smiles, and takes his partner into his arms, only to have him fall to his side and onto the couch a moment later.

"Beat?" Jim asks.

"Beat," Michael replies.

"I'll make dinner tonight."

"Thanks, Jim."

"No need to thank me."

His secret passion is cooking. While he loves to get his hands dirty with machinery, he can't help but feel a certain thrill when he is poised above the stove with food simmering in a pan. It's like a drug—adrenaline, fueled by the very need to make something delicious, the saucer his needle and the oil his pain.

He did it, he thinks. He really did it.

His boyfriend—his *Michael*—has finally done what he thought was impossible.

Tonight should be a celebration.

He will make it as such.

He prepared a feast in all respects—chicken, noodle, with a bit of vegetable on the side. When Michael rises from his short catnap and comes into the kitchen, he merely stares at the pile of food sitting on the counter and laughs when Jim raises his head and waves his eyebrows. "Jim," he says.

"I don't get to do this enough," he replies. "Especially not for you."

"But this... have you been in the kitchen this whole time?"

"Chicken Alfredo with Velveeta and broccoli on the side."

"It smells delicious," Michael says, pacing around the counter to take a bit of the cheesy broccoli on the tip of a spoon. "Tastes delicious too."

"I'm glad you like it, babe." Jim sets his hands on Michael's shoulders and guides him back around the counter. "Sit down. I'll get it for you."

"You don't have to do—"

"You've been at work all day."

"But you were at—"

"School. Yeah, I know, but I haven't been on my feet for the past eight hours."

Frowning, Michael does as asked, reclining in his seat as though it were more than just a simple plastic kitchen chair and watching Jim as he makes his way back around the counter. Once there, he begins to splay food out on two plates, humming a tune under his breath as he does so.

The day seems to be going perfectly well.

He can't ask for anything more.

"You ok?" Jim asks.

"I'm fine," Michael says. "Why?"

"You look sore."

"I'll get used to it. Don't worry."

Can't expect me not to, he thinks, but only kisses Michael's brow in response.

Settling down into bed, Jim tries not to think about Michael's work or his schooling. It seems impossible, given the lack of activity and the current circumstance, but he eventually manages to settle into an even routine of breathing and almost falls asleep until Michael rolls over and sets a hand on his face.

He cracks one eye open.

Michael frowns in response.

"You ok?" Jim decides to ask.

"Fine," Michael replies. "Just thinking."

"About what?"

"Us."

"What about us?"

"Our future... what's going to happen after you get out of school."

"You worried about it?"

"No. I..." Michael pauses. "Can I say something, Jim?"

"You know you can."

"I don't like living here."

"I know."

"You know?"

"I don't either."

"I mean... I know we'll have to wait until you get out of school, and I know that's not going to be for another two years, but I... I dunno. It's just tough, that's all."

"You've got a job," he says, "and I'm in school, so at least we have a future for the two of us."

"You really think so, Jim?"

"I think so. Don't you?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Don't worry about it," he says, pressing his lips to his boyfriend's. "Nothing more we can do about it now."

At the crux of his schooling career, he finds himself almost unable to believe that he has almost been attending college for an entire year. In this town of screams and means, it seems impossible to go about accomplishing anything, much less doing it in such a simple matter. This place is filth, vile—it breeds

hate like rats and in turn leads to religious persecution. How he's managed to avoid it these years he doesn't know, but he doesn't think it particularly matters.

As they stand at the end of the harbor, looking out at the lake that lays complete with lilies and swans, he reaches out to hold his partner's hand, but stops when someone passes by.

Not here, he thinks.

How he would love to hold Michael's hand, to kiss his cheeks or lips in public. In California, maybe, they would not be lynched, or in New York, New York, but not here. It's an undeniable fact that should they even begin to do something of the sort, it will swallow not only him, but them whole.

This is what I'm doing this for. This is why I'm back in school.

Someday—someday—maybe they could move to the coast, to a place where the economy would thrive and the energy clean and clear.

Someday.

Someday.

He thinks of someday two years later, when he is standing at the podium in the socially-oppressed town he has lived his entire life in. With his diploma in hand, garbed in a robe and with a hat on his head, he holds a plaque made of wood and embossed in gold. Upon it is the name *Jim Gabriel Arnoldson* and the words *Bachelors in Computer Sciences*. The sight of an audience full of not only his fellow peers, but his one and only family makes him feel as though he is the greatest man on earth.

In the third seat in the seventh row, near where the patrons with the last name of A sit, he finds his partner looking upon him with eyes proud and smiling. In that moment, when their eyes are captured within one another's, he thinks of how much hell he has gone through to get to this point—how, despite all his fears, doubts and misconceptions, he was able to do the one thing he has set out to do.

This is all because of you, he thinks, nodding as he begins to make his way off the stage and toward the man he loves. This is all because of you, babe. All because of you.

When Michael steps forward and into his arms, he can't help but think he's the happiest man on Earth.

Seven years later, he is standing at the register buying flowers for his boyfriend.

"They're beautiful," the cashier says. "Who are they for?"

In this socially-oppressed neighborhood, you can't get away for being gay—you can be lynched, beaten, raped and even murdered for such an open declaration, but in his mid-thirties and with more money in his pocket than he could ever imagine, he smiles, swipes his debit card through the machine, then looks the clerk straight in the eyes.

"My boyfriend," he says.

The woman does the one thing he doesn't expect she will do—smile.

"They're beautiful," she says once again, then smiles as she passes the flowers back with the receipt. "Have a good day, sir."

As he turns to leave the grocery store, he can only think of the bouquet in his hand and the man back home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kody Boye was born and raised in Southeastern Idaho. Since his initial publication in the Yellow Mama Webzine in 2007, he has gone on to sell nearly three-dozen stories to various markets. He is the author of *Amorous Things*, as well as the forthcoming novels *Sunrise: The Revised and Expanded Edition* and *Pretty Things*. His fiction has been described as ‘Surreal, beautiful and harrowing’ (Fantastic Horror,) while he himself has been heralded as a writer beyond his years (Bitten by Books.) He currently lives and writes in the Austin, Texas area. You can visit him online at KodyBoye.com.