

**dark was the night, cold was the ground**

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# **dark was the night, cold was the ground**

by [dontknowlifeatall](#)

## Summary

It's 1928, and things are looking up. Not just for America, but also for Noel Miller - who's finally landed the job he's been striving for - but a distraction by the name of Cody Kolodziejzyk is about to change everything for him.

## the theatre on vine street

The newspapers on the stands along Vine Street all have variations of the same headline. "Hottest summer ever!", "Record-shattering heat in Los Angeles!", "Summer of '28 is one for the record books!" and "HOT? It's not cooling off anytime soon!".

Noel wishes he could go to the beach and look at girls skimpily clad in bathing suits. But finally, at the age of 27, he actually has a job to fill his days. The job requires the right attire - which is a suit and tie, unfortunately. Noel can't afford the high-quality shirts - yet - and can feel the cheap shirt prickling his skin, only adding to his already increasing irritability due to the blistering heat.

It really is hot. Must be at least 100 degrees, Noel thinks to himself, and silently thanks the heavens that the theatre is only a couple of blocks away. He pulls his pants up higher, and tightens his belt so they would stay up there. No way was he going to put on his hat until he absolutely has to, so it just remains in his hand for now.

The street is naturally busy - it is 11 a.m. on a beautiful day. Cars are going by, a musician plays his trumpet for coins, and further up ahead someone is selling tamales, Noel could instantly recognize that smell. He had had many tamales after long nights at his favourite speakeasy - a vendor had the brilliant idea of setting up shop right outside the apparent barber shop at 1 a.m. How much money had that guy made this summer? Loads, Noel figures, cause he alone must have bought enough tamales to pay for a half month's rent.

Noel's eyes keep glazing over the many girls who walks by him on the busy street, and only the occasional honk of a motorcar averts his attention elsewhere.

A beautiful woman just a few feet from him catches his eye - her neckline is slightly more plunging than most girls', and her skirt just a bit shorter. He can see the bottom of her knees. She has long, dark hair and plump lips. His eyes lifts to hers, but his gaze isn't met.

"Hey! Stop that, young man!" comes a voice. It belongs to an older woman walking beside the beautiful lady - most likely her mother. "I don't want a man like you to look at her!"

The gorgeous woman, still not looking at him, smirked.

"Sorry, ma'am," replied Noel, and respectfully bowed his head as they walked by him. He walks a few steps further, before turning his head - he couldn't resist taking a quick peek at her from behind, too.

To his surprise, the woman does the same. For the first time, their eyes meet, and Noel winks. She smiles. He blows a kiss. The mother catches their secret exchange, and yanks on the woman's arm, forcing her to keep her gaze straight ahead - away from Noel.

Noel kisses his teeth. He will never see her again, he knows it. Just like every other thirty second-fling he's had.

The Hollywood Playhouse is finally in front of him. It opened just last year and is truly beautiful. The entrance is enthralling with all of its ornate details, and the nickname “America’s Most Distinctive Dramatic Theatre” deemed fitting.

Noel places the hat on his head as he swings the door open into the theatre’s hall. He was expecting, or hoping, for it to be even cooler on the inside, but it was a blessing to just avoid the scorching sun for a little while.

“Sir,” came a voice sternly. A porter hurries over from the ticket booth towards Noel, who already knows what he wants. The Mexican man never remembers Noel, even though this is his sixth visit to the theatre in the last three weeks.

Noel already has his press card ready when the porter reaches him.

“I’m from Los Angeles News. I’ve been accredited. Name’s Noel Miller.”

The suited man pulls out a list of names from seemingly nowhere, and runs a finger down it.

“Oh, yes, there you are. Sorry for that, mr. Miller. It’s just through the doors, and you’ll see them. You’re one of the last ones to come, so you may have to wait for a bit, they’re a bit cram-”

“One of the last ones? But I’m five minutes early?” interrupted Noel, deepening his voice.

“No, mr. Miller, it started at 10,” says the man, apologetically.

Noel had unintentionally puffed his chest up and let out a deep sigh as he fumbled for his invitation in his pocket, before pulling it out.

“Mine specifically says 11 o’clock,” he argues, and hands the invitation to the porter.

“Ah, yes, mr. Miller. Sorry. We have a new owner now, and he insists that certain... people... come last.”

“You mean coloured people,” says Noel, deadpan. Discrimination is something he deals with every day, but seldom at work. “What’s the new owner’s name?”

“His name is Alexander Hemsgrove, sir.”

Noel said a quick thanks, and made his way through the doors to the theatre. He couldn’t let his anger show - he was at work, and there was no way he would do anything to jeopardize this. He loved reporting, even though he had to do some shitty jobs every once in a while.

This was one of those shitty jobs.

The theatre was large, and the seats were mostly empty - except a few that were occupied by reportes, surely jotting down the essence of their brief interviews. The room had high, rounded ceilings, but all the reporters, theatre directors, management and actors were sucking on cigarettes that turned the air completely smoke-ridden. You could hardly see through it. A

shame, Noel thought, since the interior of the theatre was actually just as pretty as the exterior.

The actors and directors were all gathered at the stage, taking to one reporter at a time. Noel was just going to ask quick, easy questions - just enough to fill out a few inches of the newspaper.

Truth be told, he didn't really like the premise of the play. It depicted a struggling painter's strained relationship to a harlot. Apparently they were both so damaged from the Great War that they couldn't be truly together. Bullshit, Noel thought. He was a hopeless romantic, deep down.

He let his anger from the racist owner sink along with his pride and put on a pleasant, fake smile as he strode down the stairs towards the stage.

Noel took his place at the back of the line of reporters. Only three people are part of the cast, it seems like - a short man with simple clothes, a muscular, large man and a woman in full makeup.

Noel hates standing in line, and the only thing he can think of to make time go faster, is small talk. He hates small talk almost just as much as waiting, but it beats staring out into the smokey air.

"What do you think - this play sounds kinda shitty, huh?" Noel leans in to ask the reporter in front of him, just loud enough for him to hear.

The man turns his head. He's in his late fifties, has slightly too tight clothes and a thick moustache - but no apparent hair under his hat. He takes a full-body look at Noel - from his dark grey hat, to his untailored, grey suit, to his worn shoes. It's a slow and burning look. Noel hates it. The reporter turns around again, not uttering a word.

Noel's fake smile dampens as he folds his hands and rests them in front of his crotch, and lets his head tilt back slightly.

"God, I hate this city sometimes," he mutters quietly.

After a few more minutes of waiting, the plump reporter in front of him has carried out his interviews, and gives a short "hmpfh!" as he walks past Noel. The 27-year-old plaster on his smile nonetheless - it's finally his time.

Suddenly, a loud whistle fills the room, and a single man's loud clapping follows.

"Thank you all for coming, that's it for today!" shouts the man, who is standing in the third row of the theatre. He's got nicely placed, ginger hair and a tight, tailored purple suit. In his hand is an obnoxiously unnecessary cane. He's staring directly at Noel, and there's no doubt in his mind; it has to be the theatre's new owner.

The cast and crew instantly start chatting to each other as they make their way off the stage - everybody, except for the short actor.

“What? No, excuse me, I’m just-” Noel argues, loud enough for the owner, Hemsgrove, to hear.

“Sorry, late-comers will not be given special privileges,” says Hemsgrove coldly.

Noel’s fuming. The rage he has kept in has reached its boiling point, and he unintentionally clenches his fists.

“Psst.”

The sudden noise breaks Noel’s concentration, and he quickly looks towards the source of it. It’s the short actor, standing just a few feet from Noel. The actor’s looking at him with a small smile on his lips.

“I’ll happily talk to you, if that helps.”

He’s about the same height as Noel, which is instantly comforting. His face is gloriously uncomplicated, and inviting in a way Noel can’t quite put his finger on. Unlike the other actors, he’s not overdressed - just regular, high waisted pants, a loose shirt and suspenders. He’s holding a sixpence in his hands, and his hair is slightly longer than most other men’s.

Noel’s anger quickly calms down, and he smiles to the man - genuinely, for the first time since he set foot inside the theatre.

“Thank you, sir, I appreciate that.”

Before Noel gets the chance to, the man has already extended his hand. Noel takes it, makes a mental note of how absurdly soft it is, and shakes it.

“I’m Noel Miller from Los Angeles News.” In the corner of his eye he notices Hemsgrove staring in disbelief. It only adds to his smile.

The two men break their handshake, and Noel’s ready with his notebook to jot down the actor’s name.

“I’m Cody Kolodziejczyk.”

“Uh...” Noel looks up from his notebook, and this man, Cody, lets out a loud, wheezing laugh.

“I love telling my name to reporters for this very reason. I’ll jot it down for you,” he says playfully, and grabs the notebook out of Noel’s hands. He places his name on the paper in quite bad hand lettering. “But you can just call me Cody Ko. Or, you know, just Cody.”

“That’s an unusual name,” Noel says as the actor hands the notebook back to him.

“I’ve got ancestors in Poland,” he explains.

“No, I meant your first name,” jokes Noel, and it takes a few, agonizing seconds of awkward silence before Cody catches up.

“Oh,” he starts, before he interrupts himself by letting out another wheezing laugh. “I like you!”

Noel can feel the breath he didn’t realize he was holding in exit his body, and chuckles.

“Maybe we could talk outside? I’m getting cold from a certain someone’s icy look.”

Cody looks to the third row and struggles with not breaking out in laughter.

“He hates me too, so that’s a good idea.”

# after you

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The two men step outside from the theatre, and into the scorching heat. Cody reacts more strongly to the temperature than Noel. He squints his eyes and gives a disbelieving look up at the sky.

“Shit, it’s so hot today. I’ve been inside the theatre since the ass crack of dawn,” he says, to which Noel giggles, “and it wasn’t this hot then.”

“No, I bet. It’s crazy hot. Record-breaking heat, I read somewhere.”

“Yeah? It’s my first summer in Los Angeles, I figured this was normal,” says the actor, who is paler than most people in town, now that Noel comes to think of it.

“Where you from?” Noel asks as he pulls out his cigarettes. He nestles one between his lips, before offering one to Cody. He declines with a simple hand gesture.

“I’ve been living in San Francisco. You from here?”

“Nah,” Noel takes a long drag of the cigarette. “I’m from somewhere else. Was it the theatre that brought you here?”

Noel’s keen to change the topic of conversation away from his own personal life. It was in the past, he figured, so why still talk about it?

“It was, yeah - are you asking for the paper or yourself?”

Cody gestures toward Noel’s empty hands, presumably giving him time to find his notebook if he figures it’s worth noting.

“Oh, shit, that’s right,” says Noel and starts patting his pockets.

Noel had actually forgotten that this wasn't just a regular conversation. For once, a stranger was treating him kindly, and furthermore - Noel even liked this stranger. He didn’t like a lot of people. This was different. He actually wanted to talk to this man, more than just the few lines he’d need to fill out the space given to theatre promotion in Los Angeles News.

“Are you on a tight schedule? Maybe we could go somewhere else?” the reporter asks, and the interviewee seems a bit taken aback. His brows furrowed slightly, and his mouth curled up into an uncertain smile. He seems uncomfortable, and Noel instantly regrets asking.

“I mean... I’m supposed to have lunch now, then there’s more rehearsals at 2 o’clock. But I’ll happily eat lunch with you, maybe you know somewhere good?”



Noel grins and points further down the street. “There’s a place not far from here that serve perfect, and I mean perfect, egg salad sandwiches. You get a pickle with it too, and they even have an in-house brewed ale. Obviously without alcohol, but the taste is the same.”

“Perfect egg salad sandwiches and alcohol free beer. Let’s do it,” laughed Cody, and the two headed down the street.

The walk was merely ten minutes long, but gave enough time for the two to both discuss Hemsgrove’s moustache - they both deemed it horrifying, but in a comical way - and how ridiculous the rent was in Los Angeles.

Noel found himself being curious about whether or not Cody lived alone or in a shared flat, but wasn’t really sure why he was wondering. ‘Curious about how much he earns as an actor,’ Noel thought to himself, and decided that was definitely the reason.

The sunny walk, alongside tooting cars and shopkeepers eager to make the two men interested in their products, had flown by. They were standing in front of the sign “Klemtnr’s Blue Plate Café” in no time.

Noel takes off his hat and opens the door. He holds it open for Cody and jokingly bows and says:

“After you, my lady.”

Noel stands there for a couple seconds, but Cody doesn’t move.

“Don’t joke about that shit. People might think I’m a faggot. Or that we are,” Cody said. All the warmth that laughter and his smile brought to his face, had vanished. Not only had his face turned cold, his whole body practically screamed discomfort.

His arms and legs were unnaturally stiff, before he suddenly broke the unnatural posture by running a hand through his hair, his eyes darting around for witnesses of Noel’s joke.

“Oh, sorry, man - I didn’t mean anything by-” Noel starts as he stands upright again and lets go of the door. It closes behind him.

“Good. It’s fine,” Cody interrupts, and makes a point out of him opening the door himself and walking in. Noel hurries through the door before it closes again.

“Man, I didn’t-” Noel tries again, but Cody cuts him off.

“Do you have a favourite table?” he asks, suddenly back to a better mood. Noel’s usually good in social situations, his job calls for it, but the sudden mood swings that Cody are having is making him reevaluate every move he makes.

Noel decides to go along with it. Cody clearly wants to pretend that nothing happened. Noel can do that, he is good at pretending.

“I do, actually, it’s right over here,” Noel says, and makes his way toward the window table where he has spent many hours. To his tremendous relief, it’s available.

Had the door joke worked, he would have pulled out the chair for Cody, too. But obviously, that was completely off the table. Noel gave it a second thought, and figured that Cody was probably right to be careful.

Giving people the wrong idea could be lethal, especially for himself.

Noel and Cody sits down, and there's an undeniable, awkward tension between them. Noel hates it. He tries to get eye contact with his favourite waitress.

It's an elderly lady that knows Noel well. Her name is Anne and she treats him to the occasional piece of pie on the house - perhaps in exchange for the plentiful tips Noel gives her whenever he can afford it.

"You're getting the egg salad sandwich?" Noel asks Cody, to which he just quickly nods. He seems out of it. "Hey, Anne! Two egg salad sandwiches and the usual drinks, please."

Anne quickly looks up from her coffee brewing behind the counter, and gives him a thumbs up along with a smile. She's missing a couple teeth.

"That's Anne. She's really some-"

"Hey, man, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to overreact."

Cody's looking into Noel's eyes intently, his brows slightly dipped. He's hunched over the table, and doesn't break the eye contact - not even when an ambulance suddenly drives by with sirens on. He genuinely is sorry, Noel can tell.

"Man, don't worry about it. It was just a stupid bit anyways," says Noel, and tries to laugh it off. The awkwardness he's feeling shines through in the laugh, and Cody's bound to notice.

"It was a stupid bit," chuckles Cody, "but it would be even worse if you also pulled the chair out for me."

"I was going to!" Noel bursts out, before he genuinely laughs. Cody instantly laughs too, although it's just a silent wheeze at first.

"I knew it! I fucking knew it!"

## Chapter End Notes

thank you for all the kudos on the first chapter!

# the ugly side

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’m telling you, there’s got to be some alcohol percentage in that beer,” says Cody with a grin.

Noel shakes his head as he takes a large sip of said beer, making it trickle down his chin in the process. Cody chuckles and holds out his hands, as to say ‘you just proved my point’.

“Nah, this isn’t that kind of place,” Noel tells the actor with a smile, and wipes his mouth with the sleeve of his prickly shirt.

“If you say so,” says Cody, still disbelieving, and leans his elbows on the table. “Hey, what time is it?”

Oh, fuck.

Noel fishes out his pocket watch and sees, to his horror, that it’s already ten to two. It felt like they were only just biting into those buttery egg salad sandwiches with the immensely crisp lettuce, and that Cody had done that awful impersonation of Hemsgrove mere minutes ago.

The two and a half hours since the two men first met had flown by.

He can’t bear to tell Cody that there’s just ten minutes until his rehearsals begin. He just shows him the clock to make it easier for himself.

“Fff...fuck,” Cody mutters, and instantly downs his beer. Noel chuckles and tries to make an apologetic face.

“I’m sorry man, I completely lost track of time.”

“Don’t worry about it,” says Cody without a smile, as he hurriedly stands up and swings his jacket over his shoulder. “Thanks for treating me to lunch. See you later.”

“See you, man,” smiles Noel and remains seated as Cody darts out, calling out his goodbyes to Anne, too.

Noel looks down at his notepad. He hadn’t made any notes during their conversation. They hadn’t really talked that much about the play, either - mostly about life at the theatre in general. Which was surprisingly different than Noel had thought.

Whenever he did theatre promotions, the actors gave Noel the polished story of theatre life. Actors who were keen to entice potential ticket buyers into the glamorous life in the arts didn’t tell the full story.

Cody did.

He had chatted about the racism he had also faced from Hemsgrove, given the foreign nature of his last name. The actor had talked candidly about the grievance of unreliable pay days and never knowing how long he'd stay on the bill, before he'd suddenly lose his job to a better known actor.

Noel's initial stress of the lack of note-taking died down when he realised he had a better story. He could picture the headline: "EXCLUSIVE: The Ugly Side of Theatre Life - Actor Tells All".

He chugs the last of his beer when he suddenly feels a hand on his shoulder.

"So. Who was that?" says the familiar voice.

Noel looks up and meets Anne's brown, smiling eyes. He shakes his head with a grin.

"An actor from The Hollywood Playhouse," explains Noel as he stands up and finds his wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

"80 cents," says Anne, before placing a hand on Noel's arm. "He seems nice. Perhaps he can help you meet someone."

Noel scoffs. Anne reminded me of his grandma sometimes - equally loving and equally nagging.

"We'll see, Anne," he says and hands her a dollar. "Keep the change."

"Oh, Noel." She gives him a heartfelt look and smile. "Thank you, dear."

Stressed for time, Noel hurries out. He knows the theatre story should be printed in tomorrow's newspaper to stay relevant, so he's got no time to waste. Typing the story up was always a stressful affair. Whilst the other journalists had secretaries to type for them, Noel had to do it himself. It was a small price to pay, he was just happy he could maintain a job.

The short walk over to the office was filled with loosely formed ideas and thoughts of how he could best portray Cody's stories. He should start with explaining that the theatre life wasn't glamorous if you weren't famous - a distinction Cody had deemed significant.

As he swings into the doors of the office, he nods to the nasty receptionist Kathy, before turning into the large, shared office. The noise of clicking typewriters was ever-present, just like the thin veil of smoke from the constant smoking of cigarettes.

Noel suits himself by his desk. He barely has pushed down a single button on his Remington typewriter before his almost tolerable colleague, Robert, leans over his shoulder. Noel could smell it was him even before he turns around - whiskey, sardines and a musky aftershave.

"How did it go at the playhouse?"

"Good. I've got a great story," Noel replies shortly, he knows he is pressed for time.

"A full story? How? Surely you've only got room for the quick run-down of the play?"

Noel silently clenches his teeth. He had gotten so caught up in the idea of a full-blown cover story that the thought of actually getting it approved by the editor had slipped his mind. At this time of the day, the following day's paper was surely mostly planned out already.

"Shit," mumbles Noel and hurries over to the editor's office door, blatantly ignoring Robert's scornful chuckle.

He gently knocks on the wooden door he usually feared the most, and gets an immediate, bellowing reply: "What?!" After a quick sigh, he opens the door confidently.

"Mister West," Noel smiles.

Frank West glared at him from behind his desk. The whiskey glass near his stationary was empty, except for a half thawed ice cube. The middle-aged man gestures half-heartedly for Noel to take a seat, which he instantly does.

"What is it?" he asks - not with interest, but with dismay.

"I've got a great story." Noel feels his own confidence grow as he says it out loud.

"This is a first. Well, don't wait for me to suck it out of you, spill it."

"I went to the playhouse today to write a promotional piece about 'The Harlot and Her Ways', but I got something better. I took one of the actors to lunch and got a tell-all about the real life as a theatre actor. Let me tell you, sir - it's not all it's chalked up to be. It's an unreliable job with an uncertain pay, and the new theatre owner is apparently appalling. I was thinking the headline could be 'The Ugly Side of Theatre Life', and-"

"No."

West's simple response cuts through Noel like a knife, and his enthusiasm instantly fades. He let his talkative hands fall to his lap as he gives his editor a quizzical look.

"Sir, I'm certain this is a better story than-"

"Than what? Than the one you were assigned to do?" West's voice is stern and dark.

"Well - yes, sir. This is more in-depth and-"

West slams a hand on his table. Noel, shocked, instantly sits upright in consternation.

"Noel. You've been here a few months now." West folds his hands on the table and leans forward in his seat. It terrifies Noel. "Do you not think I would have assigned you that story if I deemed it fitting for our audience?"

"I-I.. I guess I don't-"

"You don't what? Understand? Apparently not." West sighs. Noel can't shake the feeling that he is readying himself for a lecture. "Let me make one thing very clear, Miller. You do not understand your role here. Your role is to do what you're told, exactly as you're told, or

you're leaving. For good. I'll make sure you'll never work as a reporter in Los Angeles again if you don't comply with me."

"Sorry, sir, I didn't-

"Our audience," says West loudly to drown out Noel's reply, "are not interested in 'The Ugly Side of Theatre Life'."

He makes sure to repeat the headline as mockingly as possible, and Noel doubts if he had ever felt smaller or dumber before in his life.

"Our audience doesn't want the truth about the theatre. They don't want the fucking sob story of an actor you took out to lunch. They want to believe the lie that the theatre is extravagant - are you really stupid enough to think otherwise, Miller?! I knew your kind isn't the brightest, but for fuck's sake!"

West's volume steadily increased, and Noel was sure the whole office could hear it now.

"God, Miller. Use your fucking head," the editor says, much lower this time. "I get fucking paid by the Hollywood Playhouse. We promote their shit fucking plays with their shit fucking actors for fucking money. Did you really not catch up on that?"

He was right. Noel should've known. He should've realised. Noel meets the editor's intent glare, with just one thought in his head: 'Don't lose this fucking job'.

"I'm so sorry, mister West. You're right, I should've just done what I went to do."

"Yes, you fucking should've. Get out and write me up a great promotion of the play, have it ready for print by six."

Noel stands up. He knows that the deadline is two hours too early, and knows it's mere punishment. He feels like a school kid that had just been reprimanded by the principal as he darts toward the door.

"And Miller, never get any fucking ideas again. You're just cheap labour here, nothing more. Do as you're told."

"Yes, West."

Noel leaves the room and silently makes his way back to his desk. The awkward silence in the open office tells him that everyone heard the scolding he'd received.

To think that just mere minutes ago he was confident that he would finally give the editor the big, great piece he'd always wanted to write. Now, he just felt hollow.

The only thing in his mind was how great it would be to drown this feeling in whiskey. Preferably with Cody.

## Chapter End Notes

so sorry this took ages to put out. life kind of.. happened. hope you like it xx

## it's just

Noel contemplated waiting around the playhouse after he had turned in his promotional piece for 'The Harlot and Her Ways'. As if the scolding from West wasn't enough, the stress of writing a promotion based on zero interviews with a deadline cut short by two hours also took its toll on him. To make due, he forged a couple quotations from Cody that weren't 100 percent accurate. Noel figured he wouldn't mind.

The reporter steps out into the early evening, to a slightly cooler and more tolerable temperature than earlier. There's a slight breeze in the air. It blows through Noel's cheap shirt, and he makes a mental note of how the prickly shirt has one thing going for it, at least.

He sighs heavily as he starts walking down the street. He wishes it wouldn't be too forward to seek out Cody already, he could really need a drinking buddy on this awful Thursday evening. There were just a handful of people he really knew in this city, but he can't bear the thought of having to making stupid small talk with them.

Noel realised that it was chalking up to be a very lonely night.

He enters his flat some thirty minutes later. The second he comes through the door, he kicks off his shoes and plops himself down on the mattress on the floor right beside it.

"Fuck me," he mutters.

Calling it a 'flat' might be an overstatement. It's, at best, a human storage space. There's no real kitchen or bathroom, just a bucket in a corner and a gas burner right by the room's only window. But it was a kind of home, and Noel was just happy to have a space to call his own. The landlord was African-American and could relate to Noel's struggle with finding a place to stay, so he gave him a good deal.

Noel stares up at the stained ceiling as he wonders how he would pass the time. He tries to remember the lovely girl with the visible knees he saw that morning, but he can't really remember her features. She becomes a blur.

Cody, however, is as clear as day in his mind. Noel shakes his head in an attempt to get rid of the image, but it fails.

"Ugh. Fuck."

Noel knows what it means. It's not the first time this has happened. His thoughts drift off to the summer of 1919 again, as they so often do.

Noel and Jack Lawrence, a boy from the neighbouring town, had both ended up working for Finn, the farmer with the best strawberries in the whole county. Together they had picked berries the whole summer long, and shared long conversations in the field.



It was just the two of them. It was dangerous. Every time the conversation led to romantic subjects, the tension got weird, almost... palpable. It was, of course, Noel who couldn't resist one day, and let their lips meet. It was a wonderful start to a horrible end.

The image of Jack hanging in the farmer's shed a few weeks later would forever haunt him.

"God!" Noel instantly sits upright as he can see Jack's bloated head and dangling feet over the kicked bucket again. "Fuck."

Noel doesn't fully realise, but he sits and stares into the same spot of frayed wallpaper for a good twenty minutes.

Four days pass, and they're all a blur. They're all relatively the same - scorching heat, snarky comments from West about his work for the newspaper, alcohol free beer at Anne's and silent nights at his flat. And Cody. Cody's always present, lurking behind every thought. Noel hates it.

He gives it a couple more days before it'll pass.

Tuesday evening's another lonely one spent at his flat. A tepid can of tomato beans is on tonight's menu, and Noel's eating it straight out of the can with a spoon as he's skimming the evening's newspaper.

Suddenly, a sharp knock hits his door.

*Did I not pay rent?* Noel thinks to himself immediately, before concluding that yes, he did, and the next rent isn't due until another ten days. He gets up and opens the door cautiously, tin of beans still in hand. He about drops it when he sees the bright smile of none other than Cody.

"Hey, buddy!" smiles the actor.

"Hey, man - what are you doing here?" Noel sounds more annoyed than intended, and he catches it immediately when he sees Cody's smile falling. "I mean - do come in, but how did you know I lived here?"

He moves to the side and motions for Cody to go inside, and the smile broadens again. Noel quickly places the tin down at the dresser by the door, hoping Cody didn't notice.

"Oh thank you - I know it's forward coming to your place. It's just..."

Noel closes the door behind him and awkwardly darts his eyes around the place. Fuck, it looks really terrible. Books, clothes and newspapers are scattered everywhere, and the bin is overflowing with empty cans.

"It's just?" Noel says and sits down at one of the two chairs at his flat, nodding for Cody to take the other.

"It's just," says Cody as he sits down. He looks into Noel's eyes for a painfully long time. "I saw your piece from the play."

“Oh. Didn’t you like it?”

“No, it was alright. I just... never said the things you quoted me on.”

Noel’s face pales as he nervously looks down and rubs the back of his neck.

“About that. I’m sorry, man, I should’ve ran it past you,” says Noel and looks up at Cody, who scoffs.

“It’s no worries, they were so generic anyway. But I just got so curious as to why, you know. Why didn’t you quote me on anything I actually said?” Cody almost sounds hurt. At the very least, disappointed.

“You want the honest answer?” Noel asks with a half-smile. Cody nods eagerly. “I genuinely liked talking to you so much that I forgot to take notes. And I forgot asking you about the play. We just talked about, you know, you... and me. And like, how we are, and what we do? It ended up feeling more friendly than professional. That’s all. I didn’t have much relevant to use.”

Cody’s grinning in disbelief.

“Are you kidding?”

Noel shakes his head with a smile. “No. Sorry, man.”

“No, don’t be! I’m so relieved. I thought you hated me, and that I said so much stupid shit that you had to make up something better. So I was almost offended when you chose such generic shit - like, was *that* really better than what I was saying?” laughs Cody.

Noel laughs too, and apologizes again, but Cody just brushes it off.

“I should’ve given you a heads up or at least explained afterwards. I’m sorry, man.”

Cody smiles and opens his mouth to say something, but stops himself. Instead, he shakes his head and smiles.

“Are you busy now?” he asks Noel.

“Um,” says Noel and gives his tin of beans a quick glance. “Fuck no.”

“Wanna go somewhere?”

“Fuck yes.”

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