

A Lost Generation

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I feel as though I'm drowning in sand. No air left in my lungs and an acid bitterness at the back of my throat. The flaking, putrid yellow paint of the doctor's office is searing into my retinas. The tremor in my left leg seems more violent than before.

"Mr Hernandez?"

The cold metal of the chair against my bare arm snaps me out of my stupor. I swallow air to try and get rid of the arid dryness in my throat. "Sorry. Can you repeat that?" My voice is small, too small for how big my tongue feels in my mouth.

"You have AIDS. There is currently no approved treatment in the United States and I cannot give you a prognosis, there is not enough data. I will prescribe you some supplements and refer you to a lung specialist. In the meantime, you must be more responsible than you clearly have been so far-"

Tightening my jaw, I cut him off sharply. "I know the spiel. You don't have to recite it for me." I fix my gaze firmly on the scummy grey of the linoleum floor. I can feel the bland brown eyes blinking at me from behind the square wire-rimmed glasses. I don't know if I'd prefer to see pity or disgust, I don't care to find out.

He sighs. My nails dig deep into my palm. "Here are your prescriptions, I'll fax them over to the pharmacy, you should be able to pick them up tomorrow." I reach for the grimly orange piece of paper and he pulls his hand back sharply and avoids my gaze. Disgust then. I breathe out the ghost of a laugh, snatching the prescription and stuffing it into my pocket. It's not like I'll be able to afford it.

Letting the door slam behind me, I tiptoe into the corridor, wrapping my jacket tighter around myself. It's bigger than it used to be. The floor wobbles beneath me and my knees give out, bony fingers scrabbling for the chipped hardwood bannister before I hit the ground with an unceremonious thump for the third time this week. I knew it before the words came out of

that scumbag's mouth. I've sat through the diagnosis of three friends, I know the symptoms and "treatments" like the back of my hand. I've watched ten of them waste away in front of me, guess I get to watch it happen to me too.

Gritting my teeth, I heave myself up and shakily take the steps required to leave the office, dodging the scrutinising stares of the receptionists. Fresh air fills my rattling lungs and exits as a weak puff of steam. Leaving footprints in the early frost, my eyes glaze over hoping that whatever is left of my legs takes me somewhere safe and warm. The past three months of my life run on an oversaturated technicolour tape in my head, analysing and overanalysing every slide for an answer. Some frames are fuzzy, with black spots covering faces. Others are clear as day, the sharp edges of protest signs, holding Mitch's hand as he shrank slowly on that pull-out bed in Stevie's apartment. I was safe, I swear I don't know how it happened. I didn't take any risks, I didn't, I couldn't.

The wheezy honk of a battered Ford Pinto burns through the film, battered Docs skidding to a stop outside a bookshop. The bookshop. A brazen pink triangle on the white sign above my head and a plethora of posters and flyers stuck to the window. Timings for the GLF meetings, memorial pictures, the joyous smile of Harvey Milk and a defiant pride flag hanging centre stage. A weighty rock in my stomach, I shuffle up to the door, remarking that plywood instead of glass is stuck to the bottom panel. Another brick for the collection then. The bell rings cheerfully as I slip through the door, the smell of stale coffee and old books hitting my nose and making me dizzy. Well, dizzier. Twinkling brown eyes topped by a mop of curly black hair pop up from behind a worn, dog-eared copy of *Maurice*. "Jackie-boy! How did your appointment go?"

Stevie's always so happy.

I bite the soft flesh of my inner cheek, drawing a sharp breath through my nose, not trusting myself to open my mouth. But he knows. I don't know how he does it but he always knows. Angular features soften and he unfolds his limbs from the floral-patterned armchair, standing up, staring down at me as I fix my gaze on the ugliest rug I've ever seen. "Oh, Jackie. Sweetheart." My lips are trembling, offbeat to the tremor creeping up my body. The silence gets thicker the longer I don't speak. I try "I'm sorry" but it comes out as a strangled sob, thorny vocal cords catching on each other. I screw my face up tightly, trying to contain the tears that are threatening to come out but it just hurts more as they fight their way out, cracking open the dam of my eyelids. I grab a bin and start dry heaving, the sound of my retching faded and distant. I can feel Stevie's callouses scratching the back of my neck and the low buzzing feedback of the record player spilling out Judy Garland in the corner. The space heater is blasting warmth but I'm still chilled to my core. He lowers my body down onto the loveseat on my left and flips the *Open* sign *Closed*. Sinking down next to me, he takes my hand in his, thumb pressing down gently on protruding veins. "It's gonna be okay. Jack, we'll get through this." I let that sentence hang in the air like cigarette smoke, the bitter aftertaste left unspoken.

I won't.

Mitch didn't.

Lori didn't.

Ken didn't.

Ronnie didn't.

Charlie didn't.

Neither did Hugo or Tom or Bekka or Josh or Tino or CJ or Queenie or Angie or Michel or Vito.

David is still lying in that hospital bed hooked up to wires and tubes, fighting and shrinking and shrinking and shrinking. He's just a kid. 17. Just a kid.

And they didn't even let Ryan go to Charlie's funeral. His parents buried him in a dress with his old name and banned Ryan from the funeral. They were married for God's sake. Charlie's parents didn't even know him. Threw him out at 16, didn't visit him once as he was lying in that ward, bird bones for limbs, red round lesions crawling up his neck, the death rattle in his chest and petrified eyes bulging out of concave cheeks. The nurses wouldn't even touch him, grimacing when Ry got near them. The look of resignation on Ryan's face when the nurse spat in his face when he asked for directions to the bathroom haunts me. We found Ryan curled up next to the gravestone 2 weeks later, with purple lips and red-rimmed eyes. He'd been there all night, frozen tears watering the pot of red carnations he brought. We had to write "Longtime companion" to get his obituary in the NY Herald. One name in tiny print blurred amongst the throng. What a joke.

Ryan's name appeared a week later.

Judy Garland's voice repeating "Why, O why can't I" drags me slowly back to reality where the warmth has finally permeated my bones, a pleasant change from the impertinent cold that's followed me around for weeks now. "Your record has a crack in it." My voice crackles more than a scratched record. He scoffs, "That damn brick landed on the box, we're lucky it only has a crack."

“I should go.” I push myself up tentatively, hoping that my legs decide to cooperate. “I have work tomorrow.” He nods and pulls me in for one last hug. For a fraction of a second, I catch the brief look of exhausted sorrow that’s replaced the usual joie-de-vivre. The sinking sensation of *‘not another one, I can’t take another one’*. My eyes peer over his shoulder to the wall above the till. You can barely see the once green wallpaper behind the Polaroids and carefully cut out obituaries. I can still picture the day when we stuck the first one up 3 years ago. Back when it was GRID or 4H. Back when it was less important because it was “killing the right people”. It's not like they care now any more than they did 3 years ago.

The bell twinkles mutely on my way out, and I take a left down an alley lined with vandalised posters of Reagan. Mine is half torn off but you can still see it. Mr and Mrs Death. The flicker of pride fades as my mind starts to wander far, far away from this living hell. Maybe impending mortality makes you more introspective. Who’ll be left? After I’m gone. In 10 years. In 20. Will they have found a cure by then? Will they ever? Every week there are fewer and fewer people at meetings. Then their picture appears on the wall and we hold hands and light a candle, hoping it won’t get knocked over and burn out the bookstore.

What picture will they choose for me?