

Futile Devices

And I would say I love you
But saying it out loud is hard
So I won't say it at all, and I won't stay very long
(Sufjan Stevens)

It took all of my effort to make it to the front door of the apartment. I collapsed in a sodden heap on the worn welcome mat (COME BACK WITH A WARRANT). Rainwater dripped from my coat, forming a puddle around me as I banged the back of my head against the door in a feeble plea for attention

All the same, I wasn't prepared for the door to open, sending me backwards in a heap as it swung inward. Almost instantaneously, I felt arms wrapping around my shoulders and under my arms, jerking me upwards in an attempt to right my body. I tried to help, but my legs offered all the support of cooked pasta.

"Rodge-what have you-oh, not *again*," came Warren's voice, muffled through the fog of pain.

My brother succeeded in getting me more or less to my feet, half-dragging, half-carrying me into the apartment. He led me down the short hallway to the bathroom, where he laid me out on the bathmat. The sound of gushing water filled my ears.

Moments later, Warren's face, brow furrowed in concern, swam into my field of view. Pushing his sleeves up past his elbows, he started to unbutton my shirt, peeling back the damp cotton. I grunted in pain as the material pulled away from a wound or two.

"Gimme a hand here," he grunted through gritted teeth as he started on my jeans, unfolding my legs. "You clearly had enough control to walk or stumble or whatever home. And you aren't exactly light,"

I did my best to help him, undoing the tail loop and easing out of my sodden jeans. With a grunt, I hobbled to my feet and slid-fell into the tub, which was by then full of steaming water. A sigh of relief escaped my throat as I felt the soothing water against my aching limbs.

"You can't keep coming home like this," Warren murmured, running a threadbare washcloth through the water, which was slowly transitioning from clear to pink. "What did you get into this time?"

"I got into another fight," I confessed haltingly through cracked lips.

"Looks more like you lost another fight," Warren corrected me, patting the washcloth against an abrasion on my cheek. I winced as he parted the fur of my cheek-ruff to better clean the wound. "You've been drinking, too, by the smell of it,"

"You should see the other guy," I managed, exhaling slowly as I felt my heart rate starting to return to normal.

Warren didn't crack a grin, not even for a moment. "How do you keep getting in situations like this?"

"I would tell you about the club, but that would be violating its first rule," I said. My laugh quickly became a grunt of pain as Warren dabbed at another cut, this one on my shoulder.

My brother's lips quirked for a moment, but his brow remained fixed in a surly furrow.

"It was that fucker from Omicron Phi," I said at length, feeling the warm water starting to restore life to my limbs. "He called me a fucking sissy faggot and was threatening me,"

"Sounds like a really articulate fellow," Warren shook his head, turning to search through the medicine cabinet for bandages. "Though, in his defense, you are super gay," he added, a bit of a smile flickering at the corners of his mouth as he ruffled my already unruly hair.

"Do I really act that gay?"

I must have sounded even more worried than I intended, because Warren jumped immediately into recovery mode.

"You act like you. I didn't mean anything by that," he waved his hand dismissively. "But surely you didn't get in a fight over some middle school level name-calling, right?"

"That fucking stag and his cronies had me cornered. There was no other way out. Had to defend myself. I lashed out and... well, this,"

"Mmm hmm," Warren nodded, raising my arm over my head to start wrapping gauze around it. "Well, whatever complicated diplomatic matter led to the exchange of blows, he certainly gave you one hell of a shiner,"

I didn't respond, sinking lower in the water and resting my feet on either side of the tap. We stayed in silence like that for a while, Warren tending to my wounds while I stared at my form, distorted and diminished through the water.

"Roger, what are we going to do about you?" Warren said eventually, his tone gentle.

"Krav Maga lessons?" I suggested feebly.

"You might need stitches on this one," Warren mused as he considered a particularly nasty gash on my forearm. "Were you guys using brass knuckles or some shit like that?"

"Of course not!" I snapped, wincing as my outburst strained a gash on my chest. "He got me with his antler there, cheap motherfucker. Those things are *sharp*! And I'm sure it's fine. Should heal on its own all right," I appended, more softly this time.

Anything I could do to avoid a trip to the Emergency Department. I really didn't want to risk the chance of people asking questions.

Warren's eyes flashed. "You should report him for that. Assault is assault, and that's bad enough. But that's... that's..." he waved his hand in a circular motion as if trying to summon the words.

"Aggravated assault with biological assets?" I suggested. "Yeah. Well. He could just turn around and say that I bit him,"

"You *didn't*, did you?"

"Well..."

"Oh, Rodge..." my twin massaged his temples with his fingertips. "Aw jeez, you know how hard they come down on that kind of shit,"

"Well, there's nothing we can do about that now, is there?" I snapped, wincing. "Just don't let's go to the ED. Okay? I'll be fine,"

"If you bleed out all over the carpet and lose us our deposit, I'm gonna fucking kill you," Warren grunted, reaching for more gauze and adhesive wraps.

"I'll do my best,"

Warren nodded, muttering something about antlers and fangs and dumbasses under his breath as he busied himself closing a gash with butterfly bandages. He wrapped part of my forearm with gauze to secure the dressing.

"I should just take video of all this shit and submit it as an application to the School of Nursing," he said, shaking his head at me. "How many times has this sort of crap happened? At this point, I know way more about your body than any sibling ever ought to. And that's even speaking as an identical twin,"

"Well, you're pretty much the only guy who's ever seen me naked," I laughed thinly. The laugh caught in my throat, twisting into a ragged sob. Suddenly my vision was swimming with tears, my lower lip trembling. "I'm so lonely,"

I felt Warren's palm against my cheek. "Roger..."

My brother's arms wedged themselves underneath my armpits, lifting me out of the steaming bath. I was too busy fighting a losing battle against my tear ducts to put up much of a struggle.

Warren wrapped a towel around my torso as I shivered on the pink bath tiles, using a second to vigorously remove the worst of the moisture from my limbs.

"Let's go get you warmed up again," he murmured, leading me down the hall.

Warren nudged me gently into my bed, pulling the blankets closer about me as I gazed at the wall. The mattress shifted as Warren slid into bed next to me. He pulled away the damp towel, allowing it to fall to the carpet. The warmth of his body helped to restore some sensation to my battered limbs. His T-shirt rubbed rough against my back. It felt odd, having him so close to me in the darkness, but I was too tired to gripe. A part of me just wanted the company.

"You wanna talk?" Warren said at length. His hand rubbed against my shoulder, mussing up the fur.

"Hey, watch it!" I protested half-heartedly. "You're gonna get it all standing on end and shit,"

Warren snorted. "Remember middle school? Every morning for like six solid months, you would wake up an hour early just to comb all your fur the wrong way,"

"That's because I was cool and rebellious,"

"You looked like a fucking trainwreck,"

"Okay. Maybe a bit. It was a *phase*. You don't see me giving you shit about when you dyed green streaks in your pelt. Looked like a damn Christmas nightmare or something,"

"Simpler times,"

"Why does everything have to be so complicated?"

"Maybe talking through things would help you parse them out. Unpack a bit,"

I fell silent, studying every last detail of the darkened wall as I tried to covertly wipe my eyes. My earlier confession had been an admission of weakness, one I couldn't afford to make. Warren's hand intercepted mine, gently guiding it to my chest as he draped an arm over my shoulder.

"You know how much I hate that soggy rag shit," I muttered.

"Yeah, I know how hard this sort of thing is for you, Rodge," Warren corrected softly. "But that whole cynical, smart-mouthed façade has to come down every now and again. So it's gotta be for either me, or some boyfriend of yours—"

"Isn't that *exactly* the point?" I spluttered, cutting him off. "I don't—I don't know how to *function* in that sort of relationship,"

Silence from Warren, at least for a few moments. "Because you've had no luck, or because you haven't tried?"

I grumbled softly.

"Do you want to talk about this, or should I stop wasting my time?" Warren's tone remained gentle as ever, but with an edge of authority to it.

"Wasting *your* time? You're the one who keeps pushing the issue!" I hissed back.

"You know you wanted someone to talk with,"

I balked. "Should I maybe not be so fast to get in fights with people? Probably, Ren,"

"Don't try to pull that redirection crap on me. I know you too well for that," Warren snorted, cuffing me on the back of the head. "And you know how much I hate that nickname,"

"It's just... okay, look. I... I'm really bad at putting myself out there,"

"Unless it's in a knock-down, drag-out brawl, it would seem,"

As if on cue, my shoulder twinged. I massaged the bandage with my fingers, shivering.

"It's just... I have a hard time connecting with people. On that sort of level, you know?"

"I mean, I'm trying so hard. I go out to parties and clubs and all that shit. I jump through the hoops. But it just feels like there's a barrier between me and the everyone else. Everything feels so... disingenuous. So shallow. I have a hard time faking that kind of thing. But at the same time, I want to be a part of all that disingenuousness. Lose myself in all that. I want to meet someone,"

Warren sighed, his breath warm against my shoulder. I didn't need to be facing him to know that his brow was arched skeptically.

"You want sex? Go get sex, then," I could hear undercurrent of irritation despite Warren's best intentions. "You're a handsome enough fox. So it's not like looks are a major barrier for you, at least. And that counts for something. A fair amount of something at that. Shallow as that may sound.

"Just sign up for one of those dating apps. Nothing too trashy. Just easy, harmless hook-ups. Build up that self-confidence of yours. Get some practice. Have some fun. Not everything has to mean that much,"

"But—" I tried to interject.

"Look. The 'first time' thing is silly. Not sure why you're getting yourself all hung up on that. It's really not gonna mean anything in the end. It's gonna be awkward and weird, in all likelihood. Fuck knows *my* first time was. If I'm gonna overshare. Didn't know what the hell I was doing. Fumbling around like a damn fool. But I survived, and you will too. You'll move past it,"

Try as I might, I couldn't muster a response. I felt the back of Warren's hand against my cheek.

"It's rough. I know. Always has been for you. Maybe always will be,"

"It's just... such a big jump," I burst out.

"It really is. Really," Warren cooed. If anyone else cooed at me, well, I'd have their gizzard in my teeth. But with him, I let it slide.

"Remember that night a few days before you decided to come out to Dad?" Warren continued. "I do. I found you a lot like this. Well, not fucking beaten up or whatever. But still.

"You were so scared. Really struggling, worried that Dad would reject you because of some basic thing about what you were. Like you'd have to confess to him about being a guy or a fox or whatever. But how did all that turn out for you?"

"He said he loved me," I said, smiling a little.

"Right. Well. If I remember specifically, I'm pretty sure he told you that he was proud of you for being brave and that as long as you didn't date a Bunyans fan, he would be fine. But same difference.

"Point being, I can understand in a way. It's a big change for you. But try not to prevent that from letting you experience new things,"

I rested the back of my head against the base of Warren's neck. "Okay,"

I felt the gentle, warm pressure of Warren's lips pressing against the top of my head, just between my ears. "Hey, I love you Rodge,"

"I know," I murmured, feeling my lids growing heavy. "More than I deserve, probably. There's brotherly love or whatever, and then there's you,"

"Hey," Warren's chuckle vibrated through my back. "Someone's gotta be in your corner. Might as well be me,"

My eyes started to close as I felt Warren slide out of bed, padding across the room towards the door. Despite my injuries, I couldn't help but smile as I drifted off into a fitful slumber.