

**just slow down, baby take it all in (and i promise you will never be angry again after this)**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/47489500) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/47489500>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Minecraft (Video Game)</a> , <a href="#">QSMP   Quackity SMP</a> , <a href="#">Dream SMP</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Fundy &amp; Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Fundy (Video Blogging RPF) &amp; Tallulah (QSMP)</a> , <a href="#">Fundy &amp; Niki   Nihachu</a> , <a href="#">Past Sally the Salmon (Dream SMP)/Wilbur Soot</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Fundy (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Tallulah (QSMP)</a> , <a href="#">Sally the Salmon (Dream SMP)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Modern Setting</a> , <a href="#">Floris   Fundy-centric</a> , <a href="#">Trans Floris   Fundy</a> , <a href="#">Good Parent Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Bad Parent Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">he's trying</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot is Floris   Fundy's Parent</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot is Tallulah's Parent (QSMP)</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Underage Drinking</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Underage Drug Use</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism</a> , <a href="#">Floris   Fundy Deserves Better</a> , <a href="#">Floris   Fundy Needs A Hug</a> , <a href="#">Floris   Fundy Gets a Hug</a> , <a href="#">Crying</a> , <a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">what are you to do when the person who hurt you betters themselves</a> , <a href="#">Gender Dysphoria</a> , <a href="#">not a lot but its there</a> , <a href="#">Philza Minecraft is very old</a> , <a href="#">I Love Tallulah (QSMP)</a> , <a href="#">and tallulah loves everyone</a> , <a href="#">Hopeful Ending</a> , <a href="#">Family Dinner</a> , <a href="#">Not Beta Read</a> , <a href="#">we die like wilbur soot</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 9 of <a href="#">trash pile</a> , Part 1 of <a href="#">Coals</a>
Stats:	Published: 2023-05-28 Completed: 2023-11-19 Words: 12,801 Chapters: 2/2

# just slow down, baby take it all in (and i promise you will never be angry again after this)

by [robot](#)

## Summary

“Tallulah!”

Oh.

Fundy knows that voice.

Wilbur Soot staggers up to them, bending over near in half and gasping desperately to catch his breath.

“You can’t just go running off like that-”

“But papá!” *Oh*. “Look at his hat!”

And Wilbur looks up, meets Fundy’s eyes. It’s not a halfway thing, not a quick peek and then turn away, not even the total dismissal Fundy once learned to expect from the man he called father. No, Wilbur Soot looks into his face, meets his eyes head on, and then holds his gaze for at least ten seconds before he blinks.

“Fundy.”

“*You’re Fundy?*” Tallulah asks, with all the astonishment of a child. “You’re my big brother!” She bounces again, shuffling her feet to keep her balance and squeezing Chayanne tight to her chest. “Can I play you a song!?”

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

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

The air is warm.

Fundy shifts on the bench, tugging at the hem of his jacket and casting a furtive glance over the area.

A few people are staring back at him, sitting just out of the way in their own spaces. They're all scowling at him, in one way or another. A dark look in their eyes, hatred or disgust, it doesn't matter.

His skin crawls.

He's not sure why he agreed to be here.

He knows what he looks like. He's eighteen now, too old to be here for himself and too young to be here for some other kid, dark bruises under his eyes because he'd stayed up just a bit too late drinking with Niki last night. If they don't think he's some homeless guy crashing on a bench they'd think he's some sack of shit kidnapper or something. Or maybe they'd just assume he's a druggie coming down from his most recent high- that's stupid why would he choose to camp out in a park then?

He runs a hand roughly through his hair, pulling his hat from the pocket of his coat to fit over his head. The brim is just wide enough that he can tuck his chin into his collar and hide his face from all of the prying eyes.

He shouldn't have come.

From the moment Wilbur reached out suggesting they meet, he should have set his phone down, turned around on the couch, and settled in for another day spent ignoring the world in front of the tv. He's almost certain he could have nagged Niki until she dropped her work to join him.

Neutral ground Wilbur had implied, but from the memories lurking in every nook and cranny of the park, Fundy feels it's more of a personal attack against him.

If he stares particularly hard at that blue swing set tucked off to the corner, he can almost see the smaller version of himself sitting in it. Leaning back so far he nearly falls off before Wilbur presses a hand into the small of his back to send him flying back up. On the green slide he sees hands thrown in the air, screeching laughter as he hurtles into his dad's waiting arms at the bottom. Over by the old oak with browning leaves and a scarred trunk, he sees the last dregs of an eight year old's birthday party, his mother sitting beside him on the bench with a gentle hand on his shoulder as he sobs his heart out into the plaid tablecloth.

He grinds his teeth, drawing his phone from his pants pocket. It clicks on as soon as he turns the screen to face him, displaying the time in irritatingly bright numbers. 12:19. Wilbur is almost twenty minutes late.

Shame burns hot through his chest. It makes him feel dirty and unwanted in ways that would have Niki hitting him upside the head before dragging in into a hug. *It makes him feel small.*

He should have expected this. Wilbur Soot hasn't put in the effort to show up to anything regarding Fundy since he was seven years old.

With a scowl on his lips and a terribly fragile thing trembling behind his ribs, he shoves himself off of the bench and stuffs his hands into his pockets.

He's stupid. *A fucking moron.* He should have listened to his friends. He can almost hear Schlatt's words echoing in his ears, *guy's a dead beat asswipe, he doesn't deserve the time of day from you.* And he should have listened, he knows that. Schlatt always knows what he's talking about when it comes to shit like this, his dad throws bottles at him so many times a week they could probably start a goddamn stained glass window with the pieces.

“-ulah!” Someone shouts.

It's enough of a startle from the mindless drone of chatter going on around them that Fundy realizes belatedly his nails are digging through his palms. He loosens his hands, scuffing his sneakers against the pavement.

He needs to get a grip, Wilbur Soot has been basically nonexistent to him for his whole entire life. He shouldn't be able to shatter Fundy so easily.

There's a tug on the back of his jacket.

“Excuse me mister?”

Fundy frowns, turning on his heel and dropping his gaze to meet soft brown eyes head on. The kid they belong to is holding onto his jacket with a shy little grin turning up her lips. She twists the toe of her boot into the ground.

“I just wanted to say I like your hat!” She bounces on her toes, readjusting something in her arms that Fundy didn't notice before, “this is Chyanne! He really likes foxes!”

Chyanne, is a little stuffed black dragon with short fur that shines under the sun and bright purple beads for eyes.

For as... *unexpected*, as it is, it's oddly endearing.

He crouches down, putting on the softest smile he can manage, “I can see that, hi there Chyanne, can I shake your hand?”

The kid stifles a giggle into the back of her hand, nodding eagerly.

Fundy gingerly takes hold of one of the tiny stuffed hands- paws? What do dragons have?- and shakes it up and down politely. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

“He says it’s nice to meet you too!”

“And what’s-”

“Tallulah!”

Oh.

Fundy knows that voice.

Wilbur Soot staggers up to them, bending over near in half and gasping desperately to catch his breath.

He looks... different, than Fundy remembers.

Seven years will do that to you.

The beginning scruff of a beard decorates the expanse of his chin, and in place of the familiar beige trench coat he remembers so clearly is a soft yellow sweater that hangs loosely off of his frame.

The most notable distance of all, maybe, is the absence of the stench of cheap liquor and cigarettes.

Fundy stumbles to right himself, Wilbur is still a good few heads taller than him when he stands up straight.

“You can’t just go running off like that-”

“But papá!” *Oh*. “Look at his hat!”

And Wilbur looks up, meets Fundy’s eyes. It’s not a halfway thing, not a quick peek and then turn away, not even the total dismissal Fundy once learned to expect from the man he called *father*. No, Wilbur Soot looks into his face, meets his eyes head on, and then holds his gaze for at least ten seconds before he blinks.

“Fundy.”

“*You’re Fundy?*” Tallulah asks, with all the astonishment of a child. “You’re my big brother!” She bounces again, shuffling her feet to keep her balance and squeezing Chayanne tight to her chest. “Can I play you a song!?”

“Hey, mi niña,” Wilbur kneels down beside her, not unlike the way Fundy had just been, and grasps her by the shoulders, “why don’t we do that later, remember what papá said about needing to talk with Fundy? Maybe you can show him how good you are at the swings first?”

She frowns, twisting her fingers in the soft fur of her stuffy.

Fundy's hands move on their own, he's feeling far too distant from his own body to have commanded them by himself, plucking his hat from his head to place it down on Tallulah's head. She squeals as he rubs in it, making extra certain to ruffle up the curls of her hair.

"Do you think you could keep this safe for me? It was a gift from my friend, and it's pretty expensive. I'm not sure I can trust your dad with it around."

The words threaten to choke him, his tongue too big for his mouth as he grinds it between his teeth. *Your dad.*

It's not expensive. Not even close, it would have cost three dollars at most. Niki would never be stupid enough to spend anything more than that on a hat. It shows in the peeling black nose stamped into the bill, the way the ears flop over- too weak to stand up- and the uneven placement of two green eyes.

But it's sentimental. The damn thing is one of the best gifts he's ever received in his *life*. He only ever told Niki about the fox obsession of his youth once, at sixteen, when they were both high off their asses from some mix she'd managed to bribe out of Punz, sitting out under the snowfall and talking mindlessly into the night with noses red from the cold.

The first six years of his life, he made it his mission to wear a fox onesie day and night. It was an awful thing, far too cartoonish and stained from all the shit he managed to worm himself into under Wilbur's inattentive eye, and it would only get washed every other week because he would throw a fit any time someone tried to urge him to take it off.

It's not a story he ever told again. Not one Niki ever tried to broach after either, sober or not, until his eighteenth birthday two months ago, when she'd turned up on his doorstep in expertly scheduled timing from her trip to New York, shitty ass fox hat in hand.

Niki always manages to do that. Find new ways to show him just how much she cares, just how much she listens, just how much she *loves*. Blood has never meant jackshit to Fundy, *blood doesn't mean anything*, and he sure as shit doesn't need it for him to look at Niki and be able to call her sister.

Tallulah giggles, "papá *is* pretty bad with expensive things. I'll keep it safe! I promise!"

And then she turns. And she scampers off towards the swing set.

"Fundy." Wilbur says. His voice is soft.

Something in Fundy's chest aches.

"I can't fucking believe you." There's a sour taste on his tongue. "Who the hell is that?"

"She-" Wilbur pauses, he looks a little lost. Fucking serves him right, Fundy has felt lost since he was seven years old. "She's my daughter."

"You're the one who invited me here." Fundy growls. "What the fuck was your plan? Bring around your pride and joy to parade in front of your *failure*?"

They're drawing eyes. Fundy's skin is crawling again. He wants to scratch- at *anything*. He just wants to drag his nails over his skin until everything settles and the buzzing he's feeling in his limbs fades. He can't do that. Not with so many people here, not with Wilbur, not with Niki who would be so silently disappointed. He settles for digging his nails into his palms; they're longer than they should be, sharp enough he almost winces as they scrape against his skin. Usually he would keep them trimmed short, a routine he worked himself into to avoid doing any serious damage in situations just like this. The promise of meeting Wilbur had put him on edge though, he'd let it slip through his grasp, and now he can feel the tell tale warning screech of pain as his body says, *hey, we might start bleeding soon!*

"No." Wilbur sighs, he's keeping his voice carefully calm, it's far more than Fundy would ever be able to manage. *Fuck*. "I wasn't planning on bringing her, but her grandpa got called into work and I tried to set something else up, that's why we're late, but--"

There's a part of him that wonders, which grandpa is this? Is it Wilbur's father, or the mothers? Fundy doesn't even remember Philza's face, or his voice. What he does remember is his mom cursing out both of their names into the dark of the kitchen when she thought he was passed out over the remains of his dinner.

Wouldn't that be perfect.

A whole entire part of Fundy's family cutting away from him to start over with some new kid-

"So why didn't you fucking *cancel!*? You sure as shit know how!" That gets them a few more people looking their way. He bites into his lip, shrinking under the attention.

There's something solemn in the set of Wilbur's frown. "Sit with me? Please?"

Fundy sucks on his teeth, lips curling. He shouldn't. Wilbur doesn't fucking deserve a moment more of Fundy's day. He's already gotten longer than he fucking should.

Fundy kicks the ground, glaring hard into that pleading look Wilbur doesn't turn off of his face. *Goddamn idiot*. With a soundless growl, Fundy shuffles over to a bench and sits down for the second time this day. Wilbur takes the space next to him with a heavy breath, as if he'd been scared Fundy would turn tail and bolt. *He should have*. If he'd been uncomfortable earlier, he's in hell now. Acutely aware of the man sitting beside him and the curious eyes still lingering- he sits, slouched into himself in an attempt to hide away, stuffing his hands into his pockets and squeezing- squeezing until there's something warm and slick spreading over his palms.

Wilbur doesn't take the initiative to speak. It's fucking rude is what it is, he's the one who wanted this. But Fundy doesn't call him out on it, he's not brave enough for that.

"Where the fucks her mother then?"

Wilbur startles at his side, "uh." He says, "She's- not in the picture. I adopted her- Tallulah." He shakes his head, and he gets the gooyest fucking smile on his face as he recalls whatever story he's about to spiel. It makes Fundy sick. "I met her at this thing- her group home had

brought them all out for a trip into town and she got lost, and happened to ask me for help...” He glances towards Fundy, and seems to realize Fundy is not enjoying hearing this story as much as he is telling it, “it’s a long story.” He clears his throat, “but yeah.”

*Adopted her, Wilbur says. I found her, and I chose her.* Is what he doesn’t. It’s implied enough that Fundy feels something withering in his chest. If he was smart, all his feelings for Wilbur would be long dead and buried, but Fundy failed nearly all of his tests in school, he barely managed to slip into graduation this year, he’s always been so fucking *stupid*. It’s one thing, when you’re a kid and one of your parents who you love and adore, one of the people who’s meant to make up the centre of your universe up and leaves with a few packed bags stuffed into the trunk of their car because they realize they don’t want this life. Whether the domesticity of it or the trials of fatherhood. It’s another when you realize, no, no, that’s not it at all. It had just been *you*. He can be a father, but not your father. He can be a husband, but not if you’re in the family.

“*Oh, Fundy, sweetie no.*” His mother said to him once, in the middle of the night when he’d woken up from a nightmare with tears streaming down his face and sobs shaking his body.

He’d crawled up into her bed, tucked into her arms and asked. “*Did Daddy leave because of me? Did I do something wrong?*”

Sweet fucking lies. And Fundy understands, you don’t tell a child they’re the reason their family has fallen apart at the seams. But when Fundy grew older, he contented himself with the idea that Wilbur Soot is just an asshole and a coward who started something he couldn’t finish and ran away from the responsibility of it.

No. Wilbur Soot had a kid he didn’t want, and ran to one he did.

“Was I just... not good enough?”

Breathlessly, Wilbur says, “*What?*”

“What do you mean ‘*what*’? You were supposed to be *my* dad, but you gave that up! Mom tried to explain it away when I was younger you know, *he just wasn’t ready*. She fucking excused you!” He clenches his hands tight, he’s not sure when they’d loosened, but his nails slot into the wounds with a bitter sting, “So what, you were too fucked in the head to take care of me and I wasn’t worth getting over that for?”

“Fundy, that’s not-”

It rises out of him, like bile burning hot in his throat. He thinks, *stop. You’re supposed to be over this*. The flatness of his chest, the low growl of his voice- it feels like a fucking joke and it spills out of him with vitriol, borne from the vicious aching thing throbbing in tune with his heart. “Or is it because she’s a *girl*?” There’s a lump in his throat, “couldn’t be assed to stick around after your *little princess* was gone?”

“No. Fundy, it’s not-”



“But it *is* though, isn’t it?” Perhaps the most humiliating of all are the tears burning in his eyes. He blinks rapidly to keep them from falling but just the very threat of it has shame burning hot in his chest, “you had me. I- I wanted you to come home for so *long*. I *waited* for you. And then, what, you went out and chose some other kid?”

Wilbur stays damningly silent. Fundy takes a trembling breath, scrubbing his sleeve over his eyes to sop up the wetness before it can spill. *Right on the money*, he thinks, tracking Wilbur’s gaze to the little girl who’s abandoned the swings by now, and is chasing another kid around with a gleeful grin spread across her face, a harsh red blush colouring her cheeks as she pants for breath. Her little dragon- Chayanne, is perched proudly on top of Fundy’s hat where it sits on her head, held from falling off only by one hand. He flops every which way with each step Tallulah takes, nearly tripping her up when his legs fall into her eyes more than once.

It *hurts* to watch. Because- because *seeing it*- the bounce of her curls and the delicate flounce of her bright red skirt as she takes a sharp right to cut the other kid’s path off- seeing it, Fundy can see every single way she’s better than him. He can- fuck- he can almost justify Wilbur for it. *Niki would have a few choice words on that*, he can be happy for Tallulah, for finding something good, but he doesn’t have to forgive Wilbur- he doesn’t have to understand- he doesn’t have to *compare*. He can’t stop himself. He feels sick.

If... If it had been different- if *he* had been different, if he hadn’t woken up with a twist in his gut on the morning of Uncle Techno’s birthday party, if he hadn’t looked at the dress Mom and Wilbur had tried to stuff him in and burst into tears- if he hadn’t, with all the unfilteredness of a five year old, said, *I don’t want to wear it! I’m not a girl! I don’t want it!*

Would Wilbur have stayed?

He shifts his hand- the one stuffed into his pocket, the one bleeding- the one stinging vengefully. At some point, the blood had dried into the fabric and he pries it off with a wince.

Tallulah turns towards them, not a full thing really- more like a glance over her shoulder, but when she catches them looking at her her grin grows impossibly wider and she throws her hand up to wave it wildly through the air.

He’s definitely going to be sick.

“I loved you.” Wilbur finally says, and Fundy bites into his cheek, “even after- it was never about your gender, or anything- that didn’t- *doesn’t*, matter to me, Fundy. I’d have loved you if you told us you were actually an alien-” his laugh is quiet, small, Fundy hopes the ground will open up to swallow him down. He doesn’t want to hear this, not really, he doesn’t want to give Wilbur a chance because he knows he will *crumble*. “Sally-” Wilbur breathes, “your mom wanted me gone, *away from you*. For good reason, too, I was fucked up back then. I know that. And, after she kicked me out I was *angry* that she thought she could just-” he breathes, “I tried to show her that I didn’t need her for shit, I could stay afloat on my own. Of course, I didn’t realize back then that sticking it to her would be... taking it out on you too.”

Fundy doesn’t know what to say to that, so he stays quiet. He’s not sure there’s any apology Wilbur could offer him that he would accept right now- not that he doesn’t want to, there’s a

part of him that would drop to its fucking knees and *beg him* for a chance. But, he can't. He can't.

Wilbur's thirty-five now. Old as shit and out the door, if his and Niki's evaluations on the ageing population stand for anything, which they do. Obviously. It makes it weird to see him fidgeting with his hands out of the corner of his eye. Nothing in his life has ever shown him proof in support of it, but there's this idealist stereotype in his mind that says adults are meant to have it all put together, so why the fuck does anxiety still roll off Wilbur in waves?

"Tommy wants to see you." Wilbur says, after the silence has stretched so long Fundy almost started wondering if they would suffocate under the weight of it, "do you... remember him?"

*No*, Fundy thinks immediately, but there's the faint impression of bright blue eyes and fluffy blonde hair and two missing front teeth that lingers in the back of his mind. He shrugs.

Wilbur chuckles, it's a little pained though, "he's not too much older than you, actually- so I don't blame you. Phil and Kristin adopted him a few years after Techno and I moved out- do you remember Techno?" Fundy shrugs again, "well... anyway, I told them they should have just gotten a dog instead, but Techno likes to say Tommy's not far off from one." Pause, Fundy picks at the skin around his nails, "you two used to play together sometimes, when they'd babysit you for us. It's- they all want to see you actually, I just thought Tommy might be a friendlier face to bring up first..."

"What do you want from me?"

"Whatever you'll let me have... I guess." Tallulah trips over her own feet, nearly going down, Wilbur shifts, like he's about ready to jump up the moment she'd hit the ground and race to her side- she doesn't fall though, she steadies herself and carries on, "I didn't- I would have-" He sighs, "I wanted to reach out to you sooner, but I didn't want to step on Sal's toes. You're an adult now, though. I don't deserve it- I fucked up, I know, but, I'm better now, and I want to know my son, if you'll let me."

Fundy's not sure where the little girl fits into this. If she wasn't here it would be easier, he thinks, to look at Wilbur- with a healthy colour in his cheeks and a bright glint in his eyes, healthy and happy and looking like alcohol has been behind him for years- and it would be easier to let him in. To learn him again, to love him again. But Tallulah *is* here. She's a child-sized problem with a toothy grin and a spirit too big for her body. She's everything Fundy wishes he was, she has everything Fundy wishes he'd had. Wilbur is healthy, for her. Not for Fundy. No, Fundy is an afterthought to it. Wilbur got himself together to take care of his little girl, and then thought, *hey, I have a son too, isn't that convenient?*

"I don't- you're not my dad. Not anymore. Blood doesn't mean *shit*." He rubs the back of his hand against his nose, it's not cold outside- but he finds his nose is clogged. Fuck. "And I don't fucking *get it*. I don't get you. You've got a kid now, what the fuck is my role supposed to be in there?"

"Whatever you want it to be." Fundy bites his tongue, "Tallulah, she- she found a picture of you that I keep in my wallet, and... she asked about you and I realized I didn't have much of

anything to tell. I told her about the fox thing, though- do you remember that onesie? Are you still obsessed with them?"

It's enough to startle an embarrassed laugh out of him. "Fuck no. Not for a long time."

"But your hats got the little ears-"

"My friend got that for me to make fun of me, I'm pretty sure."

"Mm. Good friend, that deserves a bit of ribbing."

"Yeah well I got her a fish afterwards so-" Fundy pauses, prodding at the light feeling that just bloomed in his chest. Fuck.

Wilbur seems to sense the sudden drop in conversation, he picks it back up, "she's been enamoured with the idea of having a big brother since then- she always asks about you whenever she has time to spare."

If it weren't for Tallulah, Wilbur wouldn't even be sitting here with him right now. Fundy wouldn't be telling him about inside jokes he has with Niki, he wouldn't be feeling this aching emptiness of *longing*, he would be moving on with his life and leaving Wilbur behind in the dust. *It's not fair*, Fundy thinks, *you had your chance to be my dad, and you left to be someone else's.*

*It's not fair.*

"I hate you." Fundy tells him, and he finds that it's *true*. Wilbur stays quiet. "And I don't trust you. And, I don't think I want any relationship with you." There's a lump in his throat. He has a choice here. This is a crossroads for him to travel. The jury has to come back in, must present a verdict, *to the executioner?* Fundy's not sure he's ready to do that, he's not sure his heart is capable of balling this up like an unwanted receipt and tossing it into the fire, so he says; "not right now."

Wilbur's acceptance is little more than a whisper, "Okay."

"Tallulah said she wanted to play me a song?"

"Yeah, she does that. She's got this little flute, she's brilliant at it too. Do you play any instruments?"

Fundy can recall a few choice nights, he and Niki drunk of their asses stumbling their way through the once locked doors of their highschool into the music room just because Fundy got the itch to try out the guitar he'd seen some kid playing at lunch- or the trumpet he'd heard in the opening band to that one school play- or he really wants to crash those two big golden symbols together to see what it'll do to his headache.

"No."

"Your mom never really did have an affinity for music. Do you want her to play for you? I can call her over?"

“Yeah. Sure.”

Tallulah, to put it lightly, is quite ecstatic that Fundy has requested she plays for him. She shoves Chayanne into his arms, and dives head first into the little backpack Wilbur hands over to her, reemerging with a green flute clutched tightly in her fist. She doesn't ask Fundy for any recommendations, not that Fundy had really expected her too, she pulls Wilbur down by the sleeve to whisper something in his ear, and Wilbur responds in a voice just low enough Fundy can't make out the words, before Tallulah is giggling and blowing a distantly familiar song into the instrument.

She's amazing, balancing Wilbur's heart in the gentle space built between her cupped palms in a way Fundy can't remember ever being allowed. Wilbur looks at her with a warm admiration drawn over his face in the form of the smile turning his lips, and Tallulah glances back at him with stars in her eyes.

But. Then she looks at Fundy, fingers moving rapidly, though clumsily, over the flute to change the note, her gaze curious and sparkling and unwavering, as if she'd trust him to pick her up when she falls and scrapes her knees no matter what. His chest twists in a way that he thinks *should* be painful, but leaves him with *love*. Tallulah deserves love.

There are birds singing along to her tune when she finally puts the flute down with a heavy panting breath. The wind flutters past like it's reaching out its arms to wish her a job well done. Fundy shifts Chayanne in his hands, careful to keep soft fur away from the flaking blood that's decorated his palms, and draws together its two front stuffed paws so the little dragon is clapping his approval. Tallulah giggles, and dips into an exaggerated bow.

“You're really good at that.” Fundy tells her, and he doesn't try to stop the little smile he feels growing.

“Thank you! I know!”

Wilbur tugs his phone from the pocket of his pants and looks down at the screen.

“Hey, it's getting close to someone's lunch time.”

“Ooh!” Tallulah bounces on her toes, stuffing her flute back into her bag, “can we go to McDonalds?”

“If you agree to eat your veggies at dinner tonight.”

A pout forms on her face as she presses a finger to her chin, deep in thought. She tugs subtly at the end of Fundy's sleeve, and he bends down willingly. With a slight glare cast in Wilbur's direction, she cups her hand over her mouth to whisper into his ear.

“Do you think that's a good deal?”

Fundy wonders if she's this conspiratorial all the time, “only if he gets you two ice creams.”

She squeals, taking Chayanne from his hands when he offers the dragon up, before turning sharply on her heel towards- her dad.

“Only if you get me two ice creams!”

Wilbur raises a brow, “since when did you become such a negotiator? Alright, I suppose I can accept those terms.”

Turning back to Fundy, she says, “are you gonna come with us too? I’ll share!”

“Oh. Uh,” he pauses, and the fact that he actually takes a moment to consider it surprises him. But- that’s too much for him. For today, “no, I can’t, sorry. My friend is waiting for me.”

“Awww.”

“Alright kiddo. Remember your manners?”

She sticks her tongue out, nose wrinkling, but she still says; “it was very nice to meet you, Fundy!”

“It was nice to meet you too, Tallulah.”

“Oh! Your hat!”

Fundy bites into his cheek. “You hold onto it for me.”

“What!? Isn’t it important!?”

“Sure is, so I expect it to be in top shape next time I see you.”

“Okay! I’ll protect it! And I won’t let papá touch it!” She slams her hands down on top of it, as if to drive home her point as she turns and takes off, “race you to the car!”

Wilbur watches her go for a second, “it was good seeing you today.” He says.

Fundy’s not sure how honest it would be for him to return the sentiment. “Yeah.”

“I can’t let her get too far ahead. Um.” He seems lost. Unsure.

Fundy feels the wrenching need to fix it. But that’s not for him to do, he doesn’t owe Wilbur anything, what he says instead is, “let me know if she ever wants to hang out.”

Wilbur smiles, nods, turns, leaves.

Fundy picks his scattered emotions up off the floor, ducks under the watchful eyes of the crowd of parents still hanging around, and wonders if he can talk Niki into coming over tonight.

this idea has been brain rotting me since tallulah was first introduced  
i love this little egg child, but i wish fundy had gotten the dad she got, he deserved better  
man

# but we don't mind the burn, we will never, ever let it go out

## Chapter Summary

His lungs ache as he lets out the breath he's been holding, wiping the back of his hand against his nose and praying he doesn't look too dishevelled now- *all that work put into looking presentable, god-* he knocks on the door before the squirming feeling in his chest can send him running.

## Chapter Notes

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

[11:34] [Wilbur Soot]: Hi Fundee! I took papa's fone!!

~

Fundy stares incredulously down at his screen, his fork half raised towards his mouth with a decent amount of pasta stabbed through the prongs, slips through his fingers to fall back onto his plate with a ringing clang that has him flinching.

Just under three weeks of peace, he's been allowed.

He spent the first week of that time miserably curled up on Niki's couch with a bottle clutched between his trembling hands as he licked over his wounds and the embarrassment of bearing his soul to *Wilbur Soot* in the middle of a public park. Niki was finally fed up with him on the seventh day and locked up the drink fridge on her way out to work, because *'drinking is only allowed when you're doing it for fun, this is how people become alcoholics Fundy.'* Fundy had scowled at her, told her that's not what she said just last week when he'd been gasping desperately for breath as he worked himself into a panic about how meeting up with Wilbur would go, and she'd placed a plastic solo cup- that she'd taken home from one of Schlatt's parties years ago and never thrown out- in his hand.

*Hypocrisy*, he thinks, just because she'd had to go off to work and couldn't stay to get drunk right along with him.

The time after that, he'd spent in a state of utter... *confusion?* He's not sure. He still- doesn't really understand what Wilbur had *wanted*. But the silence had lulled him into a sort of security, like a heavy weighted blanket settling over his body and letting him be in the dark to believe maybe Wilbur wouldn't go any farther, maybe, he could put the dull throbbing ache in his heart away in its little box and move on the way he's been determined to since he was old enough to decide Wilbur was a fucked up father to be stuck with.

His phone dings with a new message.

He shouldn't have left this avenue open, he shouldn't have told Wilbur that he'd hang out with Tallulah, or implied that he'd ever be ready to try building towards something less strained, he should have left that park with all his bitter anger balled tight in the hollow of his ribs, blocked Wilbur's number, and put the Minecraft family out of his mind for the rest of his life.

He didn't. And he doesn't now either. It's self-destructive, maybe, the way he doesn't even try to stop himself as he lifts his phone from the table and swipes the new notification.

His curiosity is burning.

Chayanne's face pops up on the screen, a large blurry blob of black fur as someone shoves the little stuffed dragon's face right up to the camera. In the top left corner, Fundy can just make out Tallulah's brown curls. He's never really wanted to be an older sibling, there's always been little appeal in being someone a kid looks up to for him, despite that one kindergartener *Yogurt* he'd taken under his wing in his last year of elementary school.

That wasn't his real name, neither of them used their real names with each other, Fundy was *big brother* to him, and he was Yogurt because his mother always stuffed at least three cherry flavoured yogurt tubes into his lunchbox every day, and when you're a kid nicknames are so much cooler.

Being someone important to a kid is maybe one of the most terrifying things he could ever imagine. He's seen firsthand, over and over again- for himself and for his friends- the failures of adults. He *knows* the importance you have to hold to that responsibility in order to not shatter everything.

Kids are fragile and there's an obligation that comes with them to do your best no matter what your feelings are because you're playing with someone else's life if you don't.

He thinks bitterly of the empty bottles decorating the coffee table in Niki's living room that she has yet to make him clean up, he'll have to throw them out before he goes home- because he's been crashing on her couch all this time, too ashamed with himself to drag himself back onto his mom's front porch, to sleep in his own bed again, to have to face her in the morning- with bags under his eyes and a history of conversation on his phone that she never wanted for him-

One of the bottles is still half full, he remembers, because even though Niki had locked up the drink fridge he'd learned how to pick locks when he was fourteen, and he'd left it behind in favour of charging into the bathroom to spill his guts in the toilet bowl yesterday afternoon, and then spent the whole evening nursing his aching throat with a handful of burnt cups of Niki's dollar store tea brand. He could pick his way over and down the rest. It'd be flat, and warm, and it would probably settle like lead in his gut, but he could forget all of this.

He's not sure he's ready for it. For obligations and expectations and pouring the bottles piled in the fridge that clink whenever you swing open the door down the drain. He thinks it might hollow him out, like a well sharpened blade carving into the soft of his stomach to scoop out



his guts and leave him scrambling, hands pressing shitty gauze to the wound and hoping it'll hold his intestines in place.

*No.* He thinks, that's not something he's ready for, and he can almost see where a Wilbur of ten years ago with a shrivelling liver and half a mind might have been coming from, but at least Fundy knows his problem. At least he's assed enough to not bring a kid of his own into it.

~

[11:35] [Wilbur Soot]: {img attached}

Hi there Chayanne, it's good to see you. [11:39]

[11:40] [Wilbur Soot]: He doesnt now how to reed

Oh? Then who am i speaking to right now? [11:40]

[11:40] [Wilbur Soot]: Tallulah!

Well, hi there Tallulah. It's nice to talk to you again, where's your dad? [11:41]

[11:42] [Wilbur Soot]: Talking to tio tekno!

Can you give the phone back to him for me? [11:42]

[11:40] [Wilbur Soot]: But I wanted you to com have diner! Papa's making mac n cheeze!

Does he know you're asking? [11:42]

~

The typing bubble bobs up and down a few times, Fundy grimaces, laying his phone flat against the table to pick up his fork again. If he doesn't, he might just go crazy thinking himself in circles. The unnecessary force he uses to stab his cooling pasta also helps to vent a few of his frustrations.

He allows himself another moment, very briefly, to imagine a life in which he clicks it off instead of staring into the lit screen from the corner of his eye. Basking in the silence and the pitch black of a blissfully ignored obligation, but guilt twists in his gut at the thought of a little Tallulah frowning down at Wilbur's phone, wondering why the other side has gone so damnably silent. He grinds his teeth against the prongs of his fork on his next bite and prays that in that life, he'd have less of a conscience.

~

[11:46] [Wilbur Soot]: Fundy, I'm so sorry. Tallulah took my phone.

It's alright. Maybe keep it out of her reach next time. [11:46]

~

He's not sure what he should expect from this. Any of it, from Wilbur having his number, having Wilbur's- knowing that Wilbur has a daughter now. God, he really hasn't unpacked any of this at all with the time he's been given. It's so much easier to content himself in ignoring it until it goes away... or, doesn't. In this case.

~

[11:47] [Wilbur Soot]: That's not taking the invite back, though. We would love to have you.

[11:49] [Wilbur Soot]: If you want?

~

It's really... terrible.

It's like taking one massive blind leap over a bottomless pit and hoping to fuck that he doesn't lose his footing when he touches down. That's all it is.

Meeting in a park is one thing, one little mole hill to climb, one interaction that might lead to closure or might just tear open the wound anew. But going to Wilbur's house, sitting down around their table for dinner with him and his new kid- his *daughter*- and anyone else that might live with them in their house, is another thing entirely. Do they live alone? Is Wilbur in a relationship? Do they live with the rest of the Minecraft family?

What kind of table do they have? Oak, spruce, some plastic patio set like the one in Schlatt's tiny box-sized dining room? No, it couldn't be something *that* shit. They'd never have let him adopt a kid if it was.

He's fucking curious.

Almost enough to make him sick.

~

What time? [11:51]

~

His knuckles ache in protest as he raps them against the door, he winces regretfully, bites his tongue.

There's a clamour from inside- almost like a pile of pots and pans collapsing in on themselves, and then the door opens with a loud creak.

“Fundy? Why are you knocking?”

“I lost my key, sorry.”

“Again?” Sally says a sharp teasing thing in her voice.

Fundy blanches, avoiding her gaze, something catching in the back of his throat. The guilt is heavy enough he thinks he might just sink into the wooden boards of the porch if he let himself. He *shouldn't* feel guilty, not for something like this, he's eighteen, he's an adult, he can make his own decisions now.

But.

But he knows that she never wanted him in contact with Wilbur again, he knows that she tried her damndest to raise him all on her own, so she could say Wilbur never even really had a hand in it. So they could move on from that chapter of their lives, with only good things on the horizon.

He can feel the shame curling in his gut, rotting him from the inside out.

It's stupid, that he feels worse about this than he does the drinking.

“I think I need to tell you something.” He mumbles.

It wipes the smile off her face instantly, her eyes narrowing to take him in with more consideration. He ducks his head to watch the shadows cast around his shoes from the afternoon sun.

“Well, come in first. There's still some lunch on the stove- it's not much. I thought you were staying with Niki for a few more days.”

“I already ate, but thanks.” He says, stepping through and toeing off his shoes, “and I was going to, I just.”

The smell of the house is a comfort. Something familiar and warm to step into after a long while spent out that settles his bones. This has been home almost nine years now, since the day Sally got that promotion at work and finally, *finally*, her salary was big enough she could ask her parents for help and promise with meaning to pay them back, and they'd packed up and moved out of the little apartment they'd moved into after-

He kicks his shoes off at the door, and follows her through the house, settling himself down on one of the stools tucked beneath the kitchen counter while she sets about cleaning up the pan.

“Mom.” He starts, while her back is turned, and her hands are already wet from the faucet.

She pauses a moment, taking that in, and then, “can I turn around?”

“Don't. Please,”

“Alright.” She says, flicking off the water despite the way she sets back to scrubbing at the pan.

“I...” He digs his nails into his palms. “I met up with Wilbur... a while ago.” Sally doesn’t give any outward response, doesn’t even stall a second, “I know that you- that he-”

He grinds his teeth, frustrated, glaring down at his hands. *Just say it-*

A weight lands on his shoulder, he jolts- head turning, Sally gives him a gentle smile as he meets her eyes. “Hey kid, you’re alright.” Yeah... he’s... “you’re an adult, you can talk to anyone you want. I’m not mad, okay?” His next breath shudders, and then there’s a wetness in his eyes- Sally pulls him in, he wraps his arms around her waist and *holds*. “That’s been bothering you a lot, huh?” Fundy nods against her shoulder, her hand pets through his hair.

“I didn’t- I know he’s a *dick-* and you didn’t want me talking to him-”

“Well. It’s been a long while since I last talked to your dad. I wanted him gone so he wouldn’t give you the taste of disappointment he gave me before you were ready for it. But people change, and you’re well capable of making your own decisions now. How was it?”

He sniffles, a bit daunted by the fact he’s crying hard enough her shirt is damp against his face. He hasn’t cried on her like this since he was twelve, when he crashed his bike and fell hard enough it scraped deep red welts into his palms that had his sleeves sticky with blood. “He- has a daughter.”

“Oh. Oh baby. I’m sorry.”

*It’s fine*, he thinks about saying, but just the thought of the words makes his tongue heavy. It’s not fine, not here in his own home with his mom who raised him all on her own because Wilbur started something he couldn’t finish. It’s not fine at all, and this might be the one place he can allow himself to accept that.

“She’s sweet. She’s a good kid. But.” He sucks in a steadying breath. Sally lets him take his time, fingers carding through his hair, her other hand rubbing gentle circles into his shoulder, “I said I’d go to dinner at their house tonight.”

“Are you going to be okay with that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re in over your head, huh? It’s always okay to cancel.”

Maybe, if Tallulah hadn’t been the one to invite him first. If there wasn’t a little girl waiting excitedly for him to play big brother for the night. If he’d said no from the start, it would be fine. But he hadn’t, and he’s sure Wilbur’s already delivered the news that he’ll be coming, and she’ll have already built her hopes up.

He *can’t* break that down.

He squeezes his arms around her one more time, for good measure, blinking the last of the tears from his eyes before he pulls back, “I need to shower.”

Sally sighs wistfully, cupping his face in her hands, “my little boy’s gotten so big.”

“*Mom-*” he huffs wetly, tugging himself free.

“Alright, alright, go on.”

-

In the shower, shrouded by the darkness of the bathroom, he drops the shampoo bottle on his toe. It's stupid, to *not* turn on the lights still- when he's as comfortable in his own body as he's ever been, but-

He has to feel around for it with trembling hands, and in the process knocks over the conditioner and the body wash- and all that carefully piled strength he'd built up in Sally's embrace cracks hard enough he has to choke down a gut-wrenching sob as he slumps into the shower wall.

He's not ready for this at all.

-

Six o'two PM finds Fundy sweating on Wilbur's doorstep, pulling restlessly at the front of his shirt to try and cool himself off.

He was late leaving the house, which is the first fatal mistake, usually he's out the door at least thirty minutes early- *in his own defense*, he didn't even *know* about dinner until eleven- but he'd spent a longer time in the shower than he intended, bashing his head against the wall and just in general feeling *miserable* for himself. And then he'd spent an even longer time picking through all the clothes in his closet, an anxious knot in his gut that would *not* let him try any of his shirts on without appraising it three times over to decide whether it would be too casual. At least all his clothes are already of the broke college student variety, in early preparation for his classes next year, and he hadn't needed to worry about looking over dressed.

By the time he'd left the house it had been four thirty PM, and dinner was at *six*, and he'd stared hard at his phone screen all the way to the bus stop, chewing his lip and reading the address over enough times the letters burned into the back of his eyelids every time he blinked, and Wilbur's house was about an hour away, which would give him a good thirty minutes to break down before he actually had to walk up and knock on the door-

And then, as he stepped off a nearly vacant bus- because how many people would ride from one end of the city to the other all the way out into an upper-middle class residential district at five thirty on a Wednesday- into the street, he learned the only bus stop anywhere near Wilbur's house was far enough away that if he wanted to make it in time, he'd have to run.

So.

His lungs ache as he lets out the breath he's been holding, wiping the back of his hand against his nose and praying he doesn't look too disheveled now- *all that work put into looking presentable, god-* he knocks on the door before the squirmy feeling in his chest can send him running.

There's a long minute of silence, somewhere off in the distance a dog barks, long and echoing into the dim evening. Fundy winces, studying the fancy blue paint job of the door and trying his best to act like he belongs here incase any of Wilbur's neighbours are particularly nosy and get any ideas about coming over to him- no, Schlatt's overly pushy neighbour who always smells like piss and cigarettes, he's not a salesman, *fuck off*-

It wouldn't do him any good to get the cops called on him when he's already five minutes late.

Just when the dog barking has been the only sound for another minute, and Fundy frowns, and wonders if maybe he should have looked a bit harder for a doorbell, or maybe he read the text wrong and it's not *tonight* they invited him over and he's just standing out here like a fucking *weirdo* for no reason at *all*- the door creaks open.

He's hit in the face hard with a heavy warm gust and his next breath shudders in his chest.

"Fundy!" Wilbur greets. It's not like it was back in the park, stunned and partially out of breath from chasing Tallulah however far she'd run- it's warm and welcoming and Wilbur's grinning as he says it- even if it's not really a grin that meets his eyes and there's a well buried awkwardness like he's not sure he's *allowed* to be glad to see Fundy-

Something in his chest aches. "Um. Hi. Sorry I'm late."

"What? No, don't worry it's only been a few minutes, dinner's still cooking!"

Right, that makes sense. Wilbur's definition of late has never been anything under thirty minutes anyway. Fundy's just getting in his head. Right.

"Come in!"

He steps aside and Fundy tentatively widens the gap in the door to step through, not sure *he's* allowed to touch. Putting his hands on anything in their house almost feels forbidden, which... is something he'll have to get over to sit around their dining room table whenever they get there.

He has just enough time to toe off his shoes and line them up respectfully on the matt next to another pair not even half the size when there's a very enthusiastic *Fundy!!!!* and he's stumbling back into the door with his arms full of child.

"Tallulah-" Wilbur starts, like he's about to scold her.

Fundy can't really pay attention to that though, his brain slows down into processing mode and shuts off all other functions. His hands settle into the space of Tallulah's back to hold her close almost instinctually as he stares blindly at the top of her head, and then- oh- she's practically climbing up his leg. He doesn't- he doesn't know his boundaries here- he doesn't know *what* he'd been expecting but this- this isn't it- and he doesn't know what to do with it. What he's *allowed* to do.

The decision is almost made for him, with Tallulah grappling at his pant leg hard enough she's going to pull them down if he doesn't do something- and the only thing he can think to do that's not entirely devastating like turning her away is to hoist her up by the elbows and settle her onto his hip.

*God, this is going to be awful*, he thinks, but Tallulah squeals, overjoyed, looping her arms around his neck. And. Maybe it won't be quite as bad as he thinks? Maybe-

"Hey." He says.

"I knew you'd come!" Tallulah tells him, and then she's shoving something into his hand and- oh, Chayanne, "here!"

"Hi Chayanne. It's good to see you."

The little girl snorts, "you told him that earlier! You can't say it again!"

"Oh, right. How's your day been going then?"

*"It's been very good."* Tallulah says in a low voice, hiding her grin behind her hand, and maybe it's Chayanne says, *"tío Techno took us fencing."*

"Wow. That must have been exciting, did you get to hold a sword?" Fundy thinks, *What does Techno look like?* And wishes whatever burning thing has started in his chest would go away, it's making his life very difficult.

Tallulah very quickly forgets she's meant to be doing Chayanne's voice as she begins to recount the day and how Techno had only been letting them watch his beginners fencing class before she'd snuck over to a rack of practice swords and shoved her way into the lesson. Fundy dares to risk a glance towards Wilbur, who'd more or less faded into the background of the whole interaction and finds him staring right back with a look on his face that Fundy can't really recognize.

He blinks, when he catches Fundy's gaze, and his smile crinkles his eyes.

"Llulah." He says, as Tallulah winds down from her story, "why don't you ask Fundy if he wants to see your room?"

"Oh yeah! Fundy do you want to see my room?"

"Of course," he says, setting her back onto her feet when she starts to squirm, "I have to warn you though, I'm not easily impressed."

"That's okay!" She grabs hold of his hand before he can retract, and he's forced at an awkward bend as she starts to drag him down the hall.

"Dinner will be ready in ten!" Wilbur calls after them, with an edge of hesitance Fundy might not even notice if he weren't intimately familiar with it from himself-

The similarity between them there is almost enough for him to shiver, and he distracts himself with taking in the house. The walls, the ceilings, the soft slide of his socked feet over the wooden floorboards. It's all at once, nothing and everything that he expected. His old *understanding* of Wilbur Soot sees him in a rundown shit hole with cigarette butts burning the carpet and sticky stains on the kitchen counters from overturned bottles. The new light he's mostly being *forced* to shine down on that image like an interrogation lamp is hazing out the edges, replacing cracked paint and peeling wallpaper with the nice white picket-fence he'd seen lining the front lawn, the soft ash-grey colour of the halls, and the well-worn staircase that promises a hundred stories in both the wood and the pictures on the wall as Tallulah pulls him up it and it creaks beneath his weight.

She drags him past two closed doors and one cracked open to a bathroom before ushering him into the last door on the floor. He blinks dumbly at the explosion of colour, soft yellow walls and bright red bedsheets-

She drops his wrist, cradling Chayanne into the crook of her elbow to scale up the ladder with both hands into a loft bed. When she disappears from view, Fundy peers curiously into the dark cluttered space of the desk beneath, littered with fuzzy pens and crinkled papers- and-oh. That's his hat.

He didn't really expect to ever see that agin.

“Nice room.”

Tallulah's head pops back over the ledge, flute grasped in her hand, she pauses, as if appraising the room in the same way Fundy's doing. “Papá and tío Techno painted it! Oh! And-”

She launches off the bed right from the top, Fundy's heart skips a beat, she thumps down hard enough he winces in sympathy for her knees, but she continues on like she's perfectly unharmed. She probably is, she's probably done that a hundred times. Fundy remembers going to the park with Niki, scaling up the low hanging branches of the old oak trees around the playground and throwing himself off just to feel the wind as he falls. He'd fractured his wrist like that, Niki had laughed at him for a good two minutes until she realized his crying was *real* and then he'd been stuck with a cast for the next six weeks.

He wonders if Wilbur knows about that.

“Look!” She heaves against a short bookshelf with a determined furrow in her brows and pushes it out of place hard enough everything lining the shelves rattles dangerously.

On the wall behind it is a crudely drawn duck with a very hand-shaped wing sticking up the middle finger. Fundy stares at it. Tallulah giggles.

“Tío Tommy did that one. You can't tell papá about it though! He'll paint over it!”

“Your secrets safe with me.” Fundy tells her, and then proceeds to take a back seat as she jerks the bookshelf back into place and begins telling him about all the new songs she's learned how to play.



There are a *lot* of them.

For one of them, she pulls out an orange kid-sized guitar and plucks at the strings for all of five minutes trying to tune it before she gets bored and moves onto the next.

The room is well lived in, is what he gets out of it. He's sure he'd find the whole house the same if he took the time to look. There's about a dozen crayon drawings tacked up to the wall, green stars stuck to the ceiling. The door is bruised with a handful scuff marks too high to be from any safe-sane kid-play. Fundy wonders if they're from whoever lived here before Wilbur and Tallulah moved in, or if this kid is really just that chaotic. Maybe *tio Tommy* had a hand in that too.

How much of that did he get before he lost it? Before they took it away- Sally wanted *Wilbur* out because Wilbur was the alcoholic, the deadbeat asshole, but Fundy can't imagine all of the rest of them were like that too. Wilbur had said he and Tommy used to play together, when he was young enough that all the memory Fundy has of it is yellow and blue and-

Did they ever draw on walls together?

Fuck.

It's an ugly curl of jealousy in his gut and he wants to leave, run back out into the hall, shove his way into the open bathroom and empty his twisting stomach in the porcelain bowl of the toilet. He doesn't *actually* want to do that though, not here in this house, so warm that it leaves him feeling cold.

She, Tallulah, she's just- she's really just-

The perfect daughter.

It's just dinner. It's just a kid. It's just a man making dinner for his daughter on a weeknight.

It's just.

Everything he's never had, everything he's never been, everything he's never touched.

*I can live through this.* Fundy tells himself, because he can, he survived Wilbur leaving and he can certainly survive the life Wilbur found, *but what the hell am I going to be when I come out on the other side?*

"This is the first song I learned!" She plays a total of five notes before she pauses, "pues... *second* one. Papá taught me one of his songs first."

"He- *has songs?* Fundy bites his tongue. "Want to teach me that one?"

"Really?"

"Well, I don't take to musical instruments very well, but y--"

There's a knock on the door. It's still wide open from when Tallulah pulled them through it with all the energy of a storm, but Wilbur's stopped respectfully in the hall, only his head poking through.

He smiles when they look up at him, "Sorry to interrupt, dinners ready."

"Eeeeh-" Tallulah whines, practically sinking into the floor, "papá-"

"Come on kiddo, lets show Fundy to the kitchen, yeah?"

She wrinkles her nose, blowing a raspberry into the air, but still obediently puts her flute down on the desk and drags Fundy out of the room by the arm to follow Wilbur down the stairs.

They make a brief stop in the bathroom, with rainbow coloured fish painted on the walls and an array of mismatched stickers stuck to the sink cabinet and a mermaid printed shower curtain where Tallulah clambers up onto a stool to reach the faucet and then proceeds to make Fundy stand there sudsing up his hands for the length of the *washing song*. He's spared the embarrassment of having to sing along due to the fact he doesn't know the words- he's only ever heard of it in those laminated signs they tape up in the school bathrooms.

Wilbur hovers in the doorway and it wouldn't be *that* bad except for the fact that he looks for all intents like he's trying to pretend he's not there by looking at anything but Fundy and Tallulah. It's awkward enough it makes Fundy feel awkward.

And then they're in the kitchen-slash-dining room- because they're connected onto each other- and Tallulah is tugging him over to the table that's covered in a lot of dishes and-

"I thought dinner was mac n cheese."

"Right." Wilbur says, "I thought you might like to have some options, so."

So, he worked with whatever he had, Fundy assumes. It certainly seems like a throw together mix up of whatever they might have had in the fridge that could make a good dish. He feels wrongfooted with that though. Wilbur going out of his way for Fundy seems wrong. It makes him want to squirm.

The only food he ever ate with Wilbur *before* was order in. Pizza, Chinese- sometimes, if he was in an especially good mood, or Sally wanted him out of the house, they'd go get takeout. He was never much of a chef. It was *cool*, when Fundy was a kid and fast food was the highest quality of food to have ever graced the earth because it was greasy and salty and *nothing like the vegetables mom tried to feed me for lunch*.

But this is a home cooked meal, with what looks like a mix of steamed carrots and broccoli thrown together in a bowl resting next to a small dish of white rice and-

"Come on Fundy! Sit next to me!"

And then his entire train of thought is cut off as he's man-handled into a chair by a little girl half his size.

It doesn't feel right- sitting at the table, it doesn't feel like something he's allowed. This whole fucking thing feels like a *fever* dream but he knows that it can't be, because he'd never imagine this when thinking of Wilbur Soot, he'd never-

He smooths his hands over his pants, something twisting in his gut- he can't touch, not yet, not-

Tallulah climbs up onto her chair, elbows on the table, sitting nearly on top of it while she leans over to grab the spoon in one of the dishes and pile her plate full of pasta. She's telling Wilbur about something, but Fundy's ears are ringing. This is so stupid. He's so stupid. And he's sitting here hoping his palms won't sweat stains into his jeans because he can't plate his own food-

It's domestic is what it is. Sitting here with Wilbur and his daughter like he's a part of it. Like he's not just an intruder in their home. Like this isn't everything he'd wanted of when he was younger- sans the extra kid- like it's not a childhood dream come true. It's *not* though. Because he'd sat down at the table with his mom and just wished Wilbur would turn up on the doorstep at the time he'd promised, all his long limbs, black eyes, cigarette smoke-smell, to ask him how school went, and. This Wilbur isn't his Wilbur. This Wilbur doesn't smell like cigarettes, there are no dark bags under his eyes, he's all soft edges and gentle smiles and an unobtrusive presence like he's trying not to spook a scared cat whenever he looks Fundy's way-

He wants-

He doesn't even *know* what he wants. It's fucking with his head. He wants to be a kid again, he wants to be coming home from school on an unimportant Wednesday night with his homework weighing like a stone in his bag to find Sally cooking away at the stove, and he wants her to turn and grin and pour whatever creation she'd put together today over his plate and then drag his work out of his bag to help him sort through it.

Wilbur hadn't mattered back then, not in those moments, with a test worth fifteen percent of his grade lined up on Friday, and Niki teasing him for not getting his assigned work done in class, and bones weary from fighting through his first year of high school. Things were simple. Things weren't Wilbur Soot and his daughter and their family home.

"Are you nervous?" Tallulah whispers, a hand cupped by his ear. Fundy near jumps out of his chair and she giggles, "it's okay. I get nervous at Tilín's house sometimes, his papá is *scary*. He's got a scar like this." She cuts her finger across her face, from her left eye through her lip to her chin. Fundy shudders imagining what type of accident it would take to give him that. "I'll help!"

And then she's piling food on his plate in the same way she did her own. Fundy watches, at far too much of a loss for words to mention, *hey, broccoli is shit, and I hate steamed vegetables, and I really can't eat rice without some sort of seasoning-* and then the plate is back on the placemat in front of him and it seems rude to bring up. He's already brought himself to sit here, he can eat the food put in front of him too.

Tallulah gives him a wide grin, burying her fork in her heap of pasta.

“Pequeño huevo,” Wilbur calls, and she pauses, “what do we say?”

“Gracias papá!”

“Thank you.” Fundy says too, to be polite, wiping his hands once more before tentatively grabbing his fork.

The conversation moves from there, Fundy contents himself with being silent and trying not to grimace too hard when he has to bite down on a piece of mushy carrot as Tallulah animatedly details the painting her teacher had let her do in class today- she couldn't bring it home because it was still wet by the time the bell rang but tomorrow they could hang it up on the fridge and *see how long it takes for tío Techno to notice*. Being Schlatt's friend has given him a lot of experience at blending into the background, when his dad came home early and Fundy and Niki were still in his room and he *insisted* they stay for dinner.

What he doesn't really have experience in, is the conversation turning towards him again,

“Are you going to college?”

It's not even Wilbur asking, maybe that's intentional, maybe he's holding his tongue to avoid any stiff exchanges that would alert Tallulah to something being *wrong*. It's probably for the best, he's sure if Wilbur were the one asking him things like that he'd get pissed whether it's a logical response or not.

“Yeah.” He says and moves his attention to the mac n cheese because that he can stomach without having to worry about anything.

“That's so cool!! I want to go to college too!”

And they continue like that, until their plates are clear, and Fundy's almost thrown up from biting down on something wrong twice and it's dark outside the window, Tallulah yawns and Wilbur looks her dead in the eye and says *bedtime*.

“Do you want to say goodnight to Fundy?” He asks, bouncing her in his arms.

Tallulah nods, rubbing her eyes and blinking owlshly at him, “buenos noches Fundy.”

“Buenos noches.” Fundy tentatively says back. He doesn't know if that's proper.

And they leave Fundy in the kitchen.

He stays in his seat for five minutes before he's restless. He's been in this house, what- a quick glance at the oven clock tells him it's only fifteen minutes to eight- almost two hours now. He should get a medal or something.

He doesn't want to overstep his boundaries, they've trusted him enough to leave him unsupervised, but if he sits still another second, he might break under the weight that's been growing all day. He steps into the hall and follows it back to the stairs to examine all the pictures hung there. There's a lot, mostly of Tallulah, some with her and Wilbur together, and then there's faces he doesn't know. A guy with bright pink hair tucked behind his ear and an

arm slung over Wilbur's shoulder as he stares deadpan into the camera, they both look young- Wilbur's still half dead looking, or, no, not quite half dead. It looks like it would have been taken right on the tail end of recovery.

Another of that same guy sees him sitting on a bench, hair slicked to his forehead with sweat, dressed in all white with a flimsy sword on his lap, a blonde kid balancing a few feet away from him with a golden trophy held high above his head. Techno and Tommy, probably. There's a few of them with Tallulah too, some more with Wilbur. An old blonde guy shows up sometimes, with a similarly old brunette lady, *Phil and Kristin?*

Drifting down from up the stairs Fundy can just hear the soft strumming of a guitar.

Something in his chest burns.

He leaves the pictures, back to the kitchen, gathering the plate he left abandoned on the table and placing it gently in the sink.

He should really... check the bus schedule. He didn't earlier because he's not sure what he would have done if he found the bus didn't drive out here this late. He can't really put it off much longer now. A quick search on his phone tells him exactly what he didn't want to hear, the only bus coming out here again tonight doesn't come until midnight. He bites his lip. Niki's off work by now. Niki has a car.

*Well.* He does exist to make here miserable.

She responds *yes, send me the address*, just in time for Wilbur to come back down the stairs.

There's no kid to buffer anymore.

Wilbur offers him a tired smile, "I'm glad you came. I know it was sudden, and probably a lot."

"Yeah."

"Do you have a ride home? We have a guest room if-"

"No. I mean, yes I do have a ride home- no, I don't- I don't think." Fundy pauses, "I don't. I don't *get* how you want me to fit in here." Oh yeah, okay, he's doing this *now*, three weeks of mulling and trying to dull the ache of it and this is where it's going, "you said- you said whatever I want, but that's- it's fucking bullshit!"

"Fundy-"

"Fuck. Sorry." Tallulah's asleep upstairs, he can't be yelling. "I just. *You* reached out to me, *you* wanted this- it's all- it's fucking *you*. You don't just get to decide you want something and then leave it to me to figure out what that is- *you don't get that*. If you're not going to- decide, or tell me, or whatever- I'm not- I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to fight to feel like i belong in your life-"

Wilbur thins his lips as Fundy swallows hard. He waits, like he's expecting Fundy to go on, and Fundy probably should but his eyes are burning and if he opens his mouth again he thinks he might just- break down and he *can't do that*. The thought of crying in front of Wilbur makes his skin crawl. He's not- he's a big boy, he doesn't need to sob his heart out over every little hitch, he's already cried enough today for the next three months.

“Okay.” Wilbur says, when he realizes Fundy won't be continuing. Fundy blinks at his feet. “You're right. It's not fair of me to put you in that spot.” Fundy can't look at him. He's never been good at that. “I want to be your dad, one day. I want to *earn* the right to be your dad. I want Tallulah to be able to know you, and I want you to be a part of this family. But I also,” he takes a step forward, and it almost seems reflexive by the way he stops himself before he can go any further. “I need you to know, I wasn't... trying to put that pressure on you, I thought it might make it easier for you, to not have to feel like I had demands for you to fill. I- you, need to know what you want from this too. And it's okay if you don't want any of that. I'll explain it to Tallulah, and I'll- we'll let it go.”

It's not *fair*. He doesn't know what he wants, he doesn't know if he wants any of this- and it's even worse because he knows that he- *does*. He wants all of this, he wants Wilbur to be his dad and he wants to know this side of his family, and he wants, and he *wants*. But he can't tell if that's really *him*, or if it's the sad lonely kid in the back of his mind that never really died.

He wants to go back to the day before Wilbur messaged him that first time, and he wants to smash his phone into the ground and get a new number and never have this come up and go on with the rest of his life peacefully.

He doesn't want to have to deal with this.

And he really, *really* wants to have not started this right now, because Niki won't be here for at least thirty minutes so now he has to sit here in this awkward air or leave out the front door and sit in the cold on the curb like the weirdo he really didn't want to be earlier.

“Fundy.” Wilbur says, soft and gentle, and Fundy's lips are trembling, “can I hug you?”

He doesn't even realize he's nodding until Wilbur's arms are around him, drawing him in, and his face is being pressed up into the soft fabric covering his dad's shoulder and the tears are too big to hold back anymore and this is the second time today he's ruining someone's shirt and.

He's wrapping his arms around Wilbur in turn, gripping tight to the back of his sweater and gasping in a trembling breath as he shakes apart.

He's so pathetic.

Wilbur smells like cinnamon. It's not cigarette smoke but it burns in his nose the same.

“Your house is so fucking big.”

Wilbur laughs. “Yeah, yeah it is. Tallulah’s social worker said I’d have a better chance adopting her if she had two guardians, so I blackmailed your uncle Techno to move in with us.”

“He lives here?”

“Yep.”

“Why wasn’t he at dinner?”

“I thought it would be a bit much for tonight. Techno basically only counts for a quarter of a person with how... *Techno* he is. But.”

*Thank you.* He thinks, but he’s not quite ready to say it. And they should probably stop hugging now. Yeah.

He pulls away tells himself he doesn’t miss how warm it had felt.

“When’s your ride getting here?”

“Not for a half an hour. Sorry.”

“That’s alright, you can go watch something in the living room while you wait, if you want.”

“Um.”

“Or you could help with dishes.”

“Okay.”

## Chapter End Notes

tallulah my absolute beloved

this is the end of this work, but i don't plan on abandoning this universe! fundy's got a lot of places to go and a lot of family to explore and a lot of big feelings to feel, so if you want to stick around for that it'll be in the Coals series whenever i get around to it!

i hope you enjoyed your read

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!