

sunsets on powerlines

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sunsets on powerlines

by [w_nter](#)

Summary

It starts with a broken lightbulb in his hands, or maybe in a forest, or maybe in a cabin tucked deep in the woods.

(or: a purpleduo + the darkest minds au)

Notes

hello archive of our own users have a darkest minds au
read kappuccinokat's zombie apoc fic and it got the little brain wheels turning and they spat out this

i think?? it's understandable without having read the darkest minds but i truly do not know

fic title from end credits by eden

happy reading!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

tws: minor depictions of a car accident and resulting (minor) injuries

written to punisher by pheobe bridgers

Vitalasy meets Subz in a forest.

He doesn't remember how he got there. It's a blur, hazy with fear and confusion and several drifts in and out of consciousness: there were the horrified faces of his parents and the shattered light bulb in his hands, then there were men in suits. There was a car in the driveway, then there was the stuffy backseat of it against his hands, crammed against the seat behind his back, and somewhere in the middle of it there was the distinct question of "what did I do wrong" that no one bothered to answer. He was crying, maybe, at some point, until the driver told him to shut it. There was a corner they took too fast, a jump of fear in his throat, and bright lights and crunching metal and the smell of smoke and not-quite-gunpowder creeping down his throat.

He doesn't know the rest. Reality fades between the black too quickly for him to catch.

But, well. He's in a forest, and a dozen little cuts burn on his arms and his chest and his face but something's telling him not to pry the glass out yet, something about blood flow and something about plugging the wound. He's in a forest, and he's thirsty but his mother always told him not to drink the outside water, so he pretends to ignore the urge to shove his face into the stream at his side and drink until the prickling thorns of hunger leave him, too. He's in a forest, and his entire body aches and he wants to lie down in the stream like he sees the famous athletes do in their ice baths in the commercials, but the voice of his camp counselor from two summers ago warns him of hypothermia in the back of his mind.

Vitalasy is in a forest, and night is starting to fall, and, in all honesty, he really has no idea what to do with himself.

Intermittently, he finds himself cursing past Vi for not paying closer attention to the class where they learned how to identify mushrooms, cursing him for leaving the car in the first place, and cursing his parents for not coming to save him when those people dragged him away. He gets an odd urge to flip off the lowering sun, and he does. It doesn't make him feel better.

It's at sunset, just when the visibility is starting to fade with the light, that he hears something move. It's big, he knows from the way the bushes sound when it brushes them, and it's probably nothing that's out to hurt him, with how many leaves and twigs it crunches underfoot as it walks. He pays it no particular regard.

It keeps following him -- he can hear it, the poor job it's doing of stalking him like a beacon in the twilight. It intrigues him; things don't usually follow out in the woods. It's hunt or run, usually; what a curious thing.

A few moments later, when the shadow of the trees start stretching long enough to look like a horror movie set, it speaks, and he can't really find it in him to act surprised.

"Hello?"

"Hi," he responds without turning around.

The footsteps behind him pause. "W- What?"

He slows to a stop with them. "Hi!" he repeats, brighter.

They shuffle closer again, dragging the leaves with them, and it strikes Vi that they thought they were being quiet. "You aren't scared? Like, not even a little?"

He turns around them, finds them without even having to search. The shadows fall oddly on their features, blotting out most of their face and painting their hair with strange swoops of black. "You weren't really being all that quiet." He shrugs, unapologetic. "Sorry."

It's hard to tell from fifteen feet away through the dusk, but he thinks it's shock that flashes across their expression before it steels again. "I wasn't trying to be."

"Mhm."

"Don't- god," is the retort, something between annoyance and curiosity in the words. There's a beat, still and stretching, before they tilt their head and step closer. "Are you alone?"

Vi nods. It's small, but they see it.

They take a few more steps. As they cross the distance the concern on their face comes into focus, and he has to fight some deep instinct to turn away from it, to shelter his weaknesses from the unknown. "You're hurt."

"Yeah." It comes out more broken than he was prepared for.

They step across the stream. "Do y- What happened?"

He doesn't reply, but he lets them get close, peer at the cuts, ghost over the glass embedded in them. He hisses when they brush against one of the shards, and they pull away like a reflex, like the sound burned. (Why does that translate to safety in his mind?)

He doesn't flinch away when their hands reach his face, and somewhere in the distance, it registers as an anomaly, a pattern break. Their fingers reach under his jaw, tilting his head closer to the dim light, and, distantly, he shuts the thought down.

Once their eyes stop searching, they linger, just for a moment, cold knuckles pressed ever so gently against the delicate bone. Something crosses their face, indistinct in the dark, before they blink and pull their hand away, give their head a little shake and step back. "We- uh." They swallow, and Vi tilts his head. "I have somewhere we could go. It's... not much, but it's better than being out here at night. And I can probably get that glass out of you."

Vi shrugs, and pretends it doesn't sting. "I don't mind the forest, but I would like to not have glass in me."

They smile, a fleeting brightness, before nodding in Vi's direction. "It's that way," they say, then add, almost amend, "If you'll trust me."

Trust. What a curious little thing.

Vi steps aside and gestures at the open path. "Lead the way."

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

tws: treating minor injuries, fairly detailed descriptions of medical-esque happenings

and just so yall arent confused for the entire chapter, hemostats are basically tweezers with scissor handles, allowing for more dexterity and strength :)

written to lights are on by tom rosenthal

As he follows the person through the woods, he discovers three things about them.

One: his name -- or at least the one he goes by -- is Subz.

Two: he rambles when he's nervous. The more the night creeps in, the more talkative he gets, and Vi eventually finds himself following him off his voice more than anything else.

Three: wherever they're going, there won't be anyone there to greet them. Subz lives alone.

Strangely, there's a comfort in going somewhere without people. Maybe it's his trust in the woods, or his trust in the night, or maybe just a newfound mistrust of the world, but it feels safer to trust this stranger he'd met in the middle of nowhere than brush with society again. He keeps getting the sense they've wronged him, even though he's not sure how.

"Where are we going?" he bursts out, interrupting Subz's rambling mid-sentence.

"And- uh. What?" he asks, then says a second later, "Oh. It's a, uh, a cabin. Abandoned, I think, or for sale. I didn't really bother to check."

Vi tilts his head, concern furrowing his brow. "Is it in good condition?"

Silence sits for a breath before fabric shuffles in what he assumed to be a shrug. "Good enough, I guess? It's not dilapidated or anything, just a little drafty in some places."

Vi hums, simple acknowledgement, and considers the information. He's starting to gather enough pieces to guess at the picture: a person not much older than him living alone in the middle of the woods, police at his door, shattered lightbulb in his hands and the ozone in the air when he scrambled out of the car. He hadn't been paying much attention to Subz, blending him into the ambience of the forest, but words keep catching his attention, something about running away, about camps, about Everhart's disease. (He's heard that last one before somewhere, right?)

The picture he finds is gloomy and scary and brutalist, and he decides he'd really rather not deal with that now and shelves it away in a dusty corner of his mind. He'll find it again when he's ready.

A point of light emerges from the trees, small and flickering, pulling his attention back to the woods and Subz's voice and the stars overhead. It takes him a moment to register it as a lantern, and his instinct is to run from it, avoid the people, until Subz sighs a breath tinged with relief and whispers, "Oh, thank god," under his breath. He starts walking faster, his ramble ended, and Vi follows suit with a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth and his mother's voice saying

something about a pack horse in the back of his mind.

They break through the tree line a short distance away from the cabin, the grass knee height but even and lacking wildflowers in the way that paints the ghost of a well-kept lawn over the space. Out of the shade of the trees, the light of the stars and half-risen moon is bright enough for him to see out into the backyard, a long stretch of empty grass with several trails trodden into it and a dip in the distance that he guesses to be the stream they'd left behind some time ago. *He's been here a long time*, he thinks, then looks back at Subz and quickens his steps to catch up.

When Subz reaches the doorstep, he taps each toe on the last step twice, knocking off a flurry of dirt and crumbled leaves, then reaches up to turn the lantern off. Vi watches him, and he looks past his extended arm at him and pauses, just until he reaches the stairs, then flicks the switch and lets the light die out. Vi stamps his feet on the wood of the tiny porch, considers himself, then mimics Subz's taps on the step as a light switch is flicked on inside.

He pulls his shoes off as soon as he steps inside behind Subz, habit more than anything else, and closes the door behind him. It takes a moment of fiddling with the lock to get it to work, but it eventually turns with a solid thud and leaves Vi standing awkwardly next to the door, watching Subz as he mills about in the kitchen across the house. The cabin seems much larger inside than it did on the outside, he notes, but looks up at the ceiling, finds it only half-covered by a loft, and attributes it to that and moves on.

When he looks back down, something in his neck stings and digs into the muscle, and his body reminds him very abruptly of the dozens of tiny glass shards still embedded in his skin. No longer eased by the cooling air of the night, the pain rolls over him freshly, and he doesn't manage to catch the small sound, half gasp, half whimper, that escapes his throat.

The sound almost disappears into the wind that rustles the trees outside, but Subz's head shoots up in the kitchen and a hundred emotions cross his face in a second and he's running back over to Vi before he can whisper a small "sorry" to the air.

"No, no, don't apologize," Subz says, grabbing one of his hands and leading him into the better light around the kitchen, "Fuck, I completely forgot." He settles him on the edge of a dining table, unflinching when Vi sucks in a breath through his teeth and tries to ball his hands into a fist but ends up digging his nails into his hand instead. He catches his eyes for just a moment, and says with enough earnesty it pulls at Vi's heart, "I'm sorry."

Vi just shrugs, settles his gaze between the floorboards, and tries to keep his breathing level through the hundred little bites at his flesh every time he moves.

An array of things clatter in the kitchen -- something plastic, a partially full bottle, something thin and metal, and he stops guessing at what they are after the water turns on -- and Subz is whispering to himself under it all, indistinct to Vi's ears. It doesn't sound like he's cursing himself out, though, just a level tone, keeping his thoughts in order. Vi lets it fade to ambience and focuses on his breathing.

A short moment later, feet come into his view of the floor, and an assortment of things he doesn't bother parsing are set down next to him, and a hand brushes against his collarbone so softly it feels more like a breeze, and he doesn't look up. Subz is silent as his touch moves to his right shoulder, pulling away quickly when his fingers find a shard and Vi's breath catches, and his breath is even where it wisps over Vi's hair as he reaches for something out of the pile. Vi closes his eyes, even though he knows what comes next, and Subz whispers close to his ear to keep breathing as cold metal touches his skin.

Three fingers press around the metal, stabilizing, and the shard comes out with a shock of pain up into his shoulder and the warmth of fresh blood, and he clenches his teeth to keep the gasp in his throat. The warmth of Subz's hand leaves with the chill of the hemostats, and fabric shuffles lightly before a tiny spot of gauze is pressed over the wound. It's bound to his skin with a little strip of something adhesive, and Subz's touch goes light again, searching for the next one.

Vi opens his eyes, begins to trace the grain of the floorboard between Subz's feet, and suddenly feels very tired.

Subz's hand pauses over another little protrusion, then leaves back to his side, and the steps are a little better this time, go by a little faster. Cold metal, pull, spark of pain, gauze. He breathes and pretends his breath does not shake, and Subz whispers something he doesn't catch above his head. It makes a little bit of tension seep out of his jaw anyway.

Subz's fingers trace and trace and find again, and again, it goes faster. He forces his full attention onto his breathing, and the pull doesn't even hurt all that much; he wraps his fingers around the edge of the table, closes his eyes again, and feels, acutely, how the air leaves and enters his lungs. Makes it rhythmic. Lets Subz's handiwork turn to routine across his chest.

At some point, he drifts away into his thoughts, and at some point, they find their way back to the blurry image the pieces had given him, that thing that was starting to look too much like them against the world. At some point, when Subz's fingers are ghosting across his left shoulder, he asks without meaning to, "Why did they take me?"

Subz stills, drawing in a long breath, then returns to searching with light fingertips. "I don't know, but I might be able to guess if you explain more."

Vi works the fingers of one hand on the underside of the table for a moment. "I broke a lightbulb," he replies eventually, voice much rawer than he'd expected, "And they called the police."

Subz's hands move to the side, and the hemostats clatter briefly against the wood. "How did you break it?"

Vi shrugs. "I dunno." He stills as the metal makes contact with his skin. "I was just holding it and then something moved outside and it scared me and it flashed really bright then just shattered." The shard is discarded, and gauze folded neatly in half. "They- my parents came downstairs and saw me holding it with the glass on the floor and just looked so scared. Were they scared of me?"

Subz tears a strip of the adhesive tape from the roll, applies the gauze, and does not respond. Vi breathes in a long breath, and the silence is very, very loud.

"What did I do?" he asks as Subz's hands return to searching, and finds his voice to be terribly small.

"You protected yourself," Subz says, "And the lightbulb was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Vi furrows his brow, then quickly relaxes at the stab of pain that zings across his forehead. "What?"

Subz finds another shard, and is silent through the entire routine; the moment stretches out until it's paper-thin. As his fingers delicately press on the gauze, he takes in a long breath that shudders slightly in his chest, and Vi's heart skips at that, the first sign of upset in him the entire night.

He exhales slightly, trails his hand over his shoulder in a final check, then asks, in a chillingly

gentle voice, "Vitalasy, have you heard of IAAN?"

Tilting his head, Vi absorbs the letters, lets them sit in his mind. They're familiar, he knows immediately, but he can't find the source of why. "I think so?"

Subz taps a small tray against the table, and dozens of fragile little pieces clink against thin metal and shift into each other in a movement that sounds briefly like a downpour as he picks it up. "You might've heard about it in, uh--" His feet recede, and Vi looks up just as he's dumping the glass shards into the trash, seeming not to notice how the blood on each is still shining wet. "--the news, or parents or teachers." He taps the tray once against the edge of the trash can, then returns to the table and sets the tray back down beside him. "Or flyers, maybe, if they did that here, too."

An image flashes at the back of Vi's mind. "Were they yellow?"

"Probably depended on the school," Subz responds, reorganizing his tools, "They had this list of symptoms, then this big, bold text at the bottom saying to report any kids that showed symptoms on a website called IAAN.com. They probably told you not to read it."

The image flashes clearer, warps into a memory of finding the folded and sealed piece of paper he'd been sent home with face-up on the counter when he got home from school. He'd read through it, and hadn't really understood what any of it meant at the time, just recognized some of the symptoms as ones the older kids had been saying were Everhart's disease.

"Is it the same thing as Everhart's?"

The knuckles of Subz's hand rest against the underside of his chin and tilt it up and to the side. His face betrays little, all refined focus and eyes narrowed on his cheek, but there's an echo of a frown in his voice when he replies, "God, they were still calling it Everhart's for you?"

Vi shrugs, then stills as Subz presses slightly harder into his chin. "I mean, they didn't call it that, but we did. They didn't talk to us about it."

Subz's fingers drift briefly across the skin of his cheek, then drop down to find the hemostats. "Did they have posters anywhere with different colors on them? Like, starting at green, then going blue then yellow then orange and red?"

Vi starts to shake his head, then stills again as he presses into Subz's hand. "No, I don't think so."

Subz sighs, long and indirectly frustrated. "Jesus, alright," he replies, bringing the tips of the hemostats up to a spot on his cheekbone. He breathes out, level and slow, as he pulls out the shard, and wipes away the tear that starts to gather in his eye with the back of a finger before retrieving the gauze.

"Why? Should we have?"

"I mean, if they weren't trying to shelter you to hell and back, yes," he replies, tearing off an adhesive strip, "But if it was a small town, that's probably exactly what they were trying to do."

Vi frowns as he presses the gauze over the cut. "Shelter us? From what?"

Subz draws in a long breath, and a mix of shock, anger, and something just off of pity is plain on his face as Vi watches him. He leans back, rocking onto his heels, then meets Vi's eyes and holds his gaze for a long moment, so intense with emotion Vi has to force himself to not look away.

"Everhart's disease isn't just Michael Everhart's anymore. It's the entire nation's."

End Notes

i have no particular plot or end in mind for this but im having fun writing it so come along for the ride if you'd like :]

as always, comments and kudos make my day, and thank you for reading!!
(go read kat's fic btw it's very good :) : <https://archiveofourown.org/works/42298815>)

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