

High School Bucket List

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by [jflawless](#)

Summary

Jackson has always wanted to know what it's like to be an average high school student, and Mark has been an average high school student for four years, so they're kind of a perfect match.

Notes

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

i.

"Are all high school boys this beautiful?" Mark startles, looking over at the boy who's staring at him with wide eyes from two feet away. While Mark would normally appreciate and thank the awkward compliment, he is standing in front of a urinal with his dick literally in hand, looking at an awed boy he's somehow never seen before despite spending almost four years in the small school. Mark gives him a long once over, trying desperately to find something familiar about him. It's hard to really tell, the boy's face mostly covered by the snapback pulled down over his eyes and the thick rimmed glasses that are making his barely visible eyes bug out a little. The bottom half of his face is partially covered, not necessarily on purpose, the large hood of his over sized sweatshirt bunched up around his cheeks. He has on nice, expensive shoes and jeans that Mark vaguely recognizes as designer, something even more unusual in his school than being semi-approached in the boys' bathroom.

"Are you new here?" He eventually asks, after staring back at the (hopefully) new kid for far too long. Mark tries to discreetly zip himself back into his pants even though he hasn't gotten the chance to actually use the bathroom yet, too uncomfortable with his current situation to leave it out.

"Uh, well, I'm, no," the guy replies, the small patches of skin that Mark can actually see on his cheeks and neck flushing red with an embarrassed blush. He seems surprised that Mark is speaking to him, which is unfair, because he's the one that just called Mark beautiful standing at the urinals with very little distance between them in a small town high school bathroom.

"Are you just a freshman, then?" Mark tries, and can't believe this guy has the audacity to look something akin to offended when he asks.

"I am almost eighteen years old, I'll have you know," he half-whines, and Mark, despite the fact that he thinks he could *probably* take this guy and so far he hasn't even stepped closer to Mark, let alone tried to touch him, and he *seems* generally harmless, feels panic push its way past his initial discomfort, making his stomach roll and his breathing hitch. The only kids in school who are almost eighteen are the seniors, the same kids Mark has been attending school with for his entire life, and he knows every single one by name and could draw their faces with his eyes closed and he knows their birthdays and their parents and their favorite colors and he has *no idea* who this guy is, "and I don't *technically* go to school here."

Mark's rush of panic explodes into a real fear, and any trace of the pleasant warmth he'd felt at being called beautiful is completely gone. He takes a large step back and puts his hands up in front of his chest in the mostly universal stay-back-don't-hurt-me position.

"Wait, shit, that sounds really bad," the guy realizes, several seconds too late. Minutes too late, hours even, considering it's really bad to be wandering around calling unsuspecting teen boys beautiful while they're trying to pee in a bathroom located in a school you're not even enrolled in. He suddenly pulls off his hat and glasses and pushes his hood around so his entire face is completely visible and Mark would be far more inclined to notice that he's really cute if he wasn't currently scared out of his mind and ridiculously uncomfortable with everything happening, "It's me, it's okay!"

"I don't know who *me* is!" Mark nearly shouts, shuffling backwards until he can't anymore, his backpack smashed uncomfortably between his back and the tiled wall, "That's kind of the problem!"

He watches several emotions flit across the guy's face: shock, offense, shock, defeat. By the time he's done, he's got his mouth set in a little pout and his eyes are narrowed suspiciously at Mark, a strange mix between disbelief and disappointment.

"I'm Jackson Wang?" It comes out a little more like a question than a statement, as if 'Jackson' isn't quite so sure that's his actual name, and Mark's definitely not positive that's his actual name. Jackson looks even more put out when Mark doesn't react to the name and simply continues to stare, worried, "I'm Jackson Wang!" He repeats it with far more gusto, puffing his chest out proudly. When Mark still doesn't react, Jackson repeats it a third time, "Come on! Jackson Wang! You *know*, Jackson Wang. J."

"Right, I'm Mark Tuan. With an M," Mark says, dryly, partially because he's unable to help himself, partially because he's trying to bury his fear with bravado.

"That's a lovely name, but, come on, really, Jackson! You know, Master Wang! Big J! J-Flawless!"

"I'm sorry I don't have a weird and tragically unfortunate nickname to tell you, I just go by Mark, but I still don't know who you are or what you're doing here and I'm thinking maybe I should go get the security guard," Mark says after a long minute, taking in all the horrible names that were just shouted at him. This really gets Jackson's attention and suddenly all his irritation and enthusiasm fade away, leaving him looking just as nervous as Mark feels.

"No, no, really, I'm not, okay, I know you don't know who I am, but I promise I am *allowed* to be here. I'm just not really a student? Not a full time student? I'm a temporary, visiting student. From Korea, well, *I'm* from Hong Kong but I came to America from, that's not, that's not important, never mind. I'm actually kind of famous, though? Over there, I guess, not here, apparently, but," Jackson starts inching towards the door, words still spilling out of his mouth as he goes, and Mark just watches him go, the intense fear slowly fading away into a mix of disbelief, curiosity and a little bit of amusement, "I'm doing a concert? And my manager talked to the principal because I'm here really early and I wasn't doing anything and I kind of wanted to check out the school so he put me in some classes for a few weeks but I'm not really supposed to talk to anyone, definitely not you, no offense, that wasn't, I'm just, okay, sorry, I'm... I'm gonna go, please don't tell anyone you saw me, I'm famous," the last words are said in a rush and Jackson slinks out of the door into the hallway and just as it starts to swing shut Mark can hear feet running down the hallway.

ii.

"Hey, dad," Mark starts as they're already almost home, after fifteen minutes of complete silence in the car, "I met a weird guy in the bathroom today."

"This is already a horrible story."

"Right, well, it gets better, I promise," Mark continues, "I just wanted to be sure he wasn't lying to me. He said his name is Jackson Wang and that he's not a student but he's allowed to be there because he is famous and you gave him permission."

"Did he tell you just like that?" Mark's dad asks, laughing a little.

"I skipped a lot of ums and mumbling and frantic back tracking, but, yeah, pretty much."

Mark's dad sighs heavily before explaining, "He's not lying. It was supposed to be a surprise, but he works in South Korea and we booked him for a concert. It's very cultural. He's from China and

speaks Korean, English and French, and he's a Korean idol. He's here for a while, and he agreed to talk about cultural differences and do some songs. He wanted to get a feel for high school, since he's never been to one and this is his first time being in America and being allowed to go out. We set him up with a schedule fit for the grade level he would be in and his knowledge level for him to attend until his concert next month."

"That's nice of you," Mark comments distractedly, thinking about all the kids he goes to school with and all the kids he knows who have already graduated and knowing that, if given the choice between doing nothing for three weeks and doing a pile of schoolwork and attending classes they won't be graded on that won't help them graduate or get into college, the answer is easy and not the one that Jackson chose. His dad makes a vague noise of agreement and they fall back into silence until they pulled into the driveway, when his dad breaks suddenly halfway to the garage and jerks excitedly towards Mark.

"Hey! Maybe you should hang out with him!" His dad suggests, and goes on to explain further when Mark reacts with something other than enthusiasm, "He's all alone, his manager and stylists are all much older than he is, and he's not technically supposed to talk to other students. If you already know, and I know I can trust you not to tell anyone else, then it'd be fine for you to talk to him when you see him."

"Yeah," Mark agrees, half-heartedly, "Maybe I will."

iii.

Mark googles Jackson Wang, far later when he's alone in his bedroom and his parents think he's asleep and there's no possible chance they will come into his room and see what he is doing. His earlier, half-hearted 'maybe' immediately becomes an intrigued 'probably'.

The results are an interesting mix of videos, ranging from official music videos, live performances, interviews and clips from Korean and Chinese variety shows, as well as articles and idol profiles. He skips over anything that seems like speculation, and loads a few music videos in new tabs to listen to while he reads the factual articles and profiles.

He finds out many things about Jackson, that night, like the fact that he's been training since he was nine and that he spent seven years improving his dancing, singing and rapping skills before finally debuting in a duo that lasted only a few months before he re-debuted as a solo artist. He finds out that, alongside the training Jackson did for his company, he had an intense love for fencing that he pursued personally, winning several tournaments and championships before he had to give it up to promote full time. Jackson's music isn't bad, and Mark's kind of surprised he hasn't heard it before considering he knows a lot of the artists associated with Jackson and recommended off his videos. Mark can't deny that he's impressed. Jackson works hard and, apparently, has many talents, along with being consistently upbeat, interesting and funny on every clip of a show or interview Mark clicks on.

And then, a few hours into Mark's research, he finds something *really* interesting. The word pre-debut pops up, and then there are pictures, and then there are videos. Videos of Jackson alone in a studio, or in a couple, his bedroom, no more than thirteen years old in the most recent, *rapping*. Rapping songs he *wrote*. On his *own*. In English.

And as soon as the first one starts, Mark is sure his birthday must have come early.

iv.

Mark doesn't have a *plan*. He doesn't *intend* to do anything, but, he's got a newfound curiosity about Jackson Wang and his dad's blessing to talk to the idol bright in his mind. Also at the forefront of his thoughts are some of the *phenomenal* lyrics he had the absolute pleasure to hear while perusing Jackson's pre-debut rap videos.

Which is why, when he gets hit with a stroke of luck and ends up shuffling behind Jackson in the shockingly overcrowded hallway, considering their school population's all time high was roughly five hundred students, he doesn't say anything normal like 'hello' or 'how are you doing' or 'lovely weather we're having today', but instead, just loud enough for Jackson to hear, he raps, "Don't try to treat me like I ain't famous, my apologies, are you into astrology, cause I'm, I'm trying to make it to Uranus."

Jackson whirls around at an alarming speed, a soft, horrified no leaving his mouth even before he's fully facing Mark. Mark meets him with a wicked grin. The look of terror remains on Jackson's face as he rambles, "No. No, that's terrible. I'm terrible. *You're* terrible, really terrible, the worst, even, please, how do you even know about that. You don't know who I am. This is horrible, stop."

Mark replies with another line from a different song, and before he even gets through the first couple words, Jackson is already pushing him into the nearest bathroom, the same bathroom they met in, incidentally. Mark bobs his head along to the beat he remembers so clearly, "It's like fee, fie, foe, fum, I smell the blood of a jealous ass punk."

Jackson pushes his hands frantically into Mark's face, quietly begging for him to please, *please*, just *stop*, trying to cover Mark's mouth so even if he wants to go on, he can't. Mark takes a long step back, out of reach, holding his hands up again, the two of them suddenly right back where they were the day before. As soon as Mark seems like he's going to stop, like he's done, Jackson's entire body sags with relief. Mark lets him enjoy it, just for a second, but he's unable to help himself and spits one last rhyme, "Sometimes y'all get crimey crimey, grimy grimy, but those with a tiny hiney, they get whiny whiny."

As Mark laughs, loudly, at Jackson and his lyrics and his intense embarrassment that's making him look like he'd probably rather die than be standing in that bathroom with Mark, he wonders where the unusual surge of confidence came from. It's not that Mark's insecure. He knows himself well, and likes himself plenty, but he also knows it takes him a long time to warm up to people. He has *friends* he wouldn't even do something like this to. Maybe it's just because he feels like he knows Jackson well, after reading about and watching him longer into the night that he'll ever admit, but he feels *comfortable*.

"This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me. Why would you do this? Why would anyone do this? That was *so long ago*," Jackson bemoans, but there's a little quirk at the corner of his lips that makes Mark think he's trying not to smile, erasing any guilt he might have felt listening to Jackson's words. The little almost-grin slowly grows into a real smile somewhere in the middle of Jackson's whining, and he levels Mark with a significant look, "So," he starts, sounding casual at first but when he continues, there's an excitement that seeps into his tone that he either can't or doesn't bother to attempt to hide, "you looked me up?"

"No," Mark tries to claim, suddenly embarrassed and kind of wishing he hadn't let Jackson know that he knew everything publically available about him, but when Jackson's face falls and he reverts back to the same intense disappointment Mark saw him wear a day prior, he admits, "Yes."

“And?” Jackson prompts, hopefully, and Mark considers his options. A long minute of silence passes while Mark decides whether he wants to be honest or continue with his usual stance of carefully guarded before he finally says, “You’re really impressive.”

From the sum total of ten minutes of interaction Mark has had with Jackson, he thought Jackson would *expect* the answer, sure that Jackson knows that he’s wildly talented and a little ridiculously hard working and would *own* it, but instead Mark is met with shock, Jackson responding with a surprised, “Really?”

“Yeah,” Mark confirms, “you work hard and you’re talented. I like your music and you do a lot of stuff and everyone talked about how much you practiced to get to be here, plus, I don’t know how hard fencing is, but I’m sure it involves a lot of skill, especially to win stuff.”

“Yeah,” Jackson agrees, but he seems a little unsure. Mark’s dad’s words float back through his mind, specifically the phrase, ‘He’s all alone’, and Mark is opening his mouth to speak before he even makes a concrete decision.

“Did you want to, like, hang out? Or something?”

“Hang out?!” Jackson repeats with such enthusiasm that Mark kind of wonders if he’s ever ‘hung out’ in his life. “Hang out with *you*?” He says again and it’s accompanied with a strange awe that makes Mark feel as if *he’s* the famous one.

“Yes, with *me*,” Mark half-mocks, “My dad is the principal and he told me why you’re here, and it sucks that you can’t really meet anyone, but he said I sh – “ Mark starts to say should, but he doesn’t want it to sound too much like he’s being forced, so he corrects himself mid-word, “could invite you over,” it’s a mild exaggeration, but Mark isn’t really sure where else his dad would expect him to take someone who’s *supposed* to be lying low, “so, do you want to come over? After school?”

Even though they started off with a strange encounter that Mark will absolutely be telling his children and grand children and, probably, anyone who will listen for the rest of his life, and the idea was born from a request from his dad, Mark’s developed an odd fascination with Jackson. He knows about his life, and there’s a hundred assumptions his mind automatically made after Jackson’s shocked reaction to Mark not knowing who he was and even more when he found out that Jackson was *famous* and had been for a while and that it was something he’d been working towards for even longer, but each moment he spends with Jackson, even just the few that they have so far, Mark is surprised to find that a lot of them are wrong.

“Sure,” Jackson says, reigning in his emotions enough to sound *almost* casual, “hanging out could be fun. Cool.”

“Cool,” Mark agrees.

v.

Mark watches with wide eyes as Jackson pushes cookie after cookie into his mouth, gulping down every three oreos with a swig from the can of coke he excitedly took from Mark when it was offered. He’s leaning forward curiously, elbows resting on the knees of his crossed legs, hands cupping his jaw while Jackson monopolizes the plate of snacks Mark had set between them to share. Jackson has barely spoken since they arrived, after nearly touching the floor when he bowed politely to Mark’s parents and thanked them for allowing him to visit, too busy eating.

"Hungry?" Mark asks, the word coming out with a hint of teasing that doesn't seem unusual to him even though he's never been comfortable enough with someone to mock this quickly before.

It's even more unusual that he's not that bothered when Jackson doesn't wait to swallow, opening his mouth to show a dark mass of a half chewed cookie, "I haven't eaten a cookie in a year and a half."

Mark mostly thinks it's weird that Jackson *knows* he hasn't eaten a cookie in a year and a half, because Mark doesn't frequently keep track of how often he eats cookies, and when he tries to think in his head how long it's been since he last, he can't distinctly remember a time period but he also knows it's probably only been a few weeks. His first instinct is to *tease* Jackson, which is still unusual, the ease Mark feels sitting in a room with a closed door in his house that he's invited a strange boy, who told him he was beautiful in a boys' bathroom at a school only one of them attends, but Mark doesn't. It strikes him just before he can make a joke that maybe the reason he's never thought about how often he goes between eating cookies is because there's never been a point in his life when he's wanted one and couldn't have it, and that maybe Jackson's year and a half without a single one was less optional and more mandatory.

"Why not?" Mark asks eventually, after watching Jackson consume more oreos than Mark probably has in his life.

"We, well, I'm not allowed to eat that kind of stuff during promotions. Other people are allowed to, kind of depends on your company and metabolism and how much you work out and how fit you want to be, but, I'm not allowed," Jackson ends his explanation with a long groan, dropping a half eaten cookie back onto the plate to lean back against the side of Mark's bed and place both hands on his stomach, "I feel *disgusting*. This is great."

Mark laughs as Jackson slinks further down until he's stretched out on the floor, eyes closed, one arm behind his head, a makeshift pillow, and the other rubbing slow circles on his stomach. Occasionally as Jackson will slide his hand from his hip back towards his ribs, the thin cloth of his t-shirt will follow and expose the tight muscles of his abdomen. Mark looks away.

"What's promoting like?" Mark asks. On their way to his house, in Jackson's nice, sleek town car, with his *hired driver*, Jackson had asked Mark a lot of questions. What kind of things he likes, what he does in his classes, a shocking amount about the kind of grades he gets, things he's done in school in past years, the kinds of friends he has, what he and his friends do, what he does when he gets home. When Mark had answered, "usually just eat a bunch of food and lay around until I have to get started on homework, but we'll do something cool since you're here," Jackson had immediately turned down the offer for 'cool' and requested specifically that they do what Mark would've done without him, just with more talking. Jackson went back to asking Mark every question he could think of, and Mark didn't have much of a chance to ask any back, but he was pretty sure Jackson's life was a hell of a lot more exciting than his.

"Busy," Jackson says after a few long beats of silence, opening his eyes to glance at Mark through his peripherals, "I only promote for a few months, and then things calm down, but really I only get a few weeks of a break, and even then it's not much of a *break*, because I still have to practice and there's still occasional appearances and things. This is the longest break I've had so far, and I still have a few things on my schedule, on top of the show at your school. Pre-promotion, when we're making the album, or single, or video, whatever, is just as busy as promoting it is. I get a few weeks to be a little lazy and to eat however I want but as soon as we're prepping to promote, I have to get back in shape right away, lose and weight I might've gained, and then we start producing music. I

don't get to produce a lot, I'm not very good yet, but I think it's fun so I've made a couple tracks that they've let me use, but, then I'm recording all the time and planning choreography and practicing choreography and they usually talk to me about music videos so I help plan those, and then film them, which can be a lot of work or not too much, depending on concepts and outfits and locations and angles, and then as soon as the album is ready, it's all photoshoots and appearances and stages and interviews and tours and fanmeets," Jackson trails off, his eyes having fallen shut again sometime during his explanation, the hand that was soothing his aching stomach still again, "Sounds kind of boring, right?"

"No," Mark replies immediately, following it with an incredulous snort, "it sounds exciting. Is it boring?"

Jackson turns his entire head this time, looking straight at Mark, "Sometimes," he starts, but he seems unsure, "it's not *boring*, exactly, but it's a lot of work, and it's a lot of... I don't know... same shit, different day? I don't know. It was more fun when there was a duo? I'm by myself a lot. Like, there's staff everywhere, a lot of them, and I'm grateful, but they're all a lot older than me and when we're together it's not for *fun*, it's always *work*, but, I don't *not* like it. I love it, a lot. I wouldn't have been doing it for almost ten years if I didn't *like* it. It's just... lonely? Which sounds weird, because I'm surrounded by people, and people *like* me, but, they don't really like *me*, you know?"

Mark nods even though he doesn't really know. He tucks his thighs against his chest, curling his arms around his legs and rests his chin on his knee, "It sounds hard," he corrects.

"It is, but it's still not bad. I don't wanna sound like I'm complaining," Jackson mumbles, turning to stare at the ceiling again, instead of Mark, "It's a good life. I get to do things I love, every day, and I get paid well, and I'm popular, and it feels good, it's just..." Jackson's voice drops even more and Mark has to strain to understand what he says, "I just kind of want to be a regular kid sometimes."

"Yeah," Mark agrees, softly, even though he did get to be a kid and he *still* gets to be a kid and no one expects all that much from him and he could eat an entire package of oreos every day if he wanted and sometimes when he doesn't feel like going to school his dad will pretend he's sick and let him stay home and play video games for sixteen hours and he actually has *no idea* how Jackson feels. He thinks about how ridiculous it was, the way he met Jackson, and how strangely comfortable it feels, to sit here talking so seriously to a boy, who is *famous*, who he met three days earlier and invited over on a whim, and it's *strange*, Mark knows, and his life is starting to feel way too much like a teen rom-com. He's struck with an idea, suddenly, and figures if his life is going to get *weird*, he might as well just go all the way with it.

"Hey, how long are you here for again?"

"Like, a month," Jackson reminds him, and Mark is already making the list in his head.

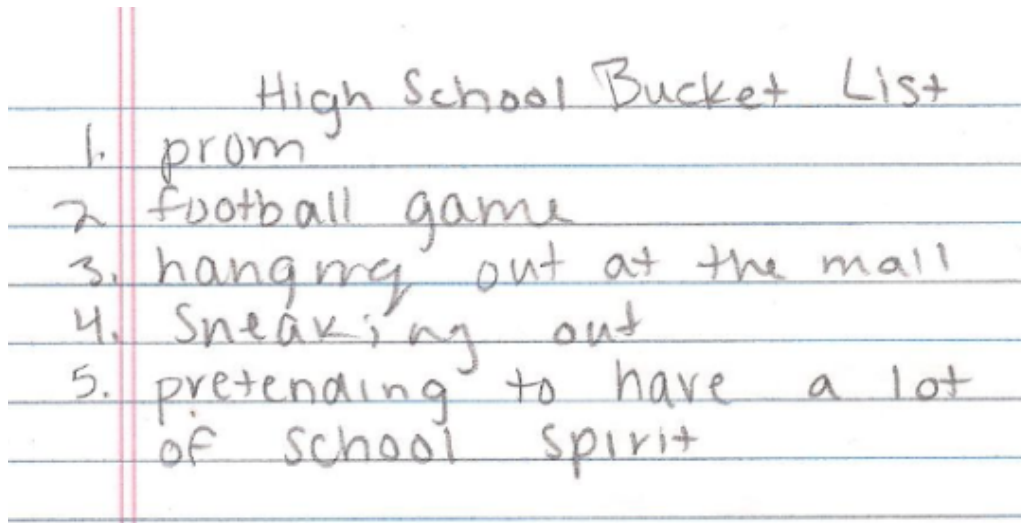
vi.

Mark catches Jackson slinking around the empty hallways during the lunch period he didn't know they shared, and his excitement is momentarily tainted with curiosity on how he was the first person to catch Jackson when he always looks *so* shady.

Jackson is peeking around a corner, pressed against the wall, presumably checking for a clear hall before he continues to his destination when Mark leans over behind him and says, "You know, you'd look a lot less suspicious if you just walked through the hall."

He stumbles back just fast enough to avoid getting smacked in the mouth as Jackson's head whips backwards and Jackson jumps around to face him. Jackson goes quickly from looking afraid to smiling widely when he realizes it's just Mark, and Mark waves a slip of paper in Jackson's face, "Look at this."

Jackson takes the paper out of Mark's hand and as soon as Mark sees his eyes scanning the words, his excitement fizzles out into embarrassment because, honestly, it's such a silly idea and Jackson probably doesn't even want to hang out with him again and it's so weird and no one does this kind of thing in real life. Mark's nerves increase with every second, Jackson taking much longer than Mark thinks is necessary to read the twenty words written on the page, his mouth hanging open.



"What do you think?" Mark asks, voice getting shaky as his nerves and regret start to become overwhelming.

"This is amazing," Jackson tells him, finally looking up from the paper.

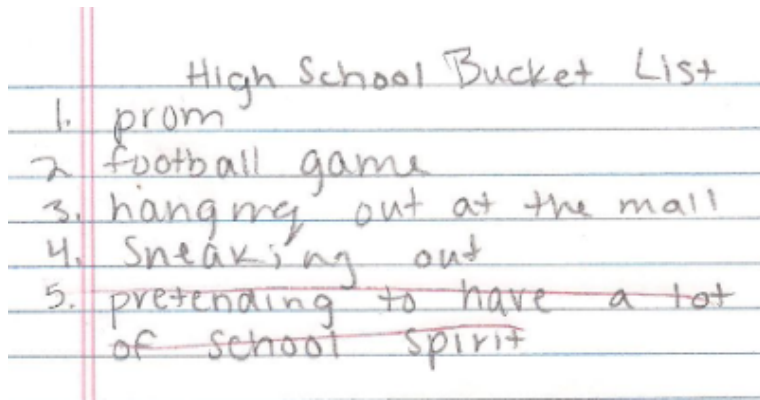
"Really? It's not dumb?"

"It's the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me."

vii.

As soon as Mark and Jackson arrive back at Mark's house, after Mark has presented Jackson with the list, Jackson pulls the paper out of where it had been pressed between the pages of one of his textbooks, carefully kept in perfect condition, and roots around Mark's desk until he finds a red pen.

Mark sees him start to scribble on the sheet and moves around to stand behind Jackson, so he can watch the writing from over his shoulder.

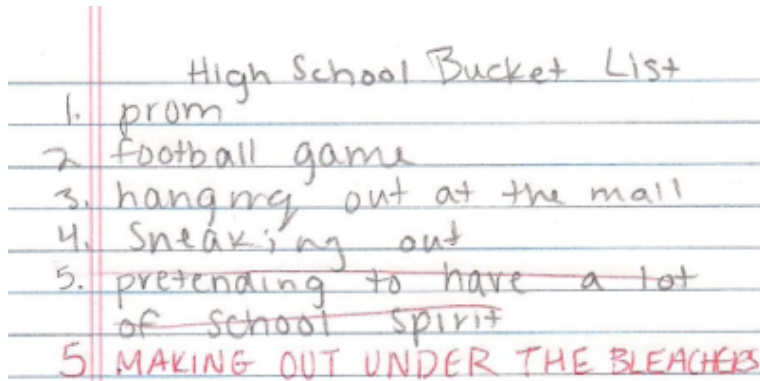


"Are you *editing*?"

"Mark," Jackson sighs, as he starts to add something beneath the item he's scribbled out, his hands positioned in Mark's line of sight, so he can't read the addition, "I have to be invisible. I can't even *pretend* to have school spirit. Think about how many people would notice me then."

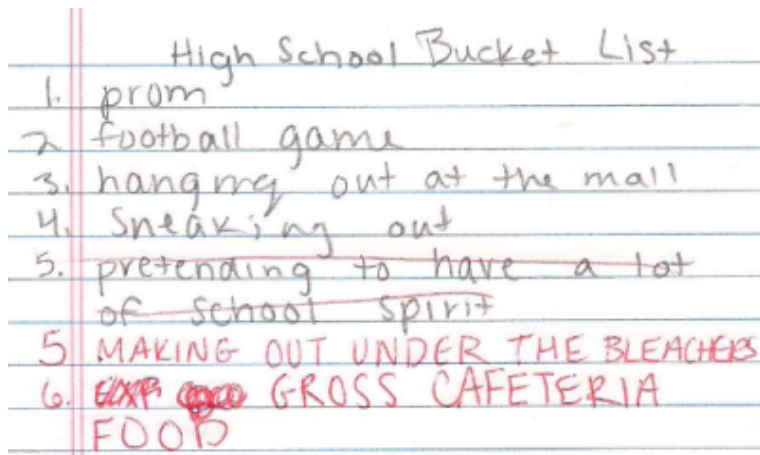
"Fine, fine," Mark concedes, "Edit all you want."

Jackson leans back after he finishes writing, back hitting Mark's chest, Mark's chin nearly resting on Jackson's shoulder as he tries to read. "Is this one okay?" Jackson asks, unsure.



"I guess. We'll have to find someone for you to make out with, though," Mark can feel Jackson's shoulder tense from where it's pressing against his collarbone, their awkward position making Mark hyper aware of the other boy.

"I'm sure we'll figure something out," Jackson says, a little rough, before leaning back over the page to keep adding.

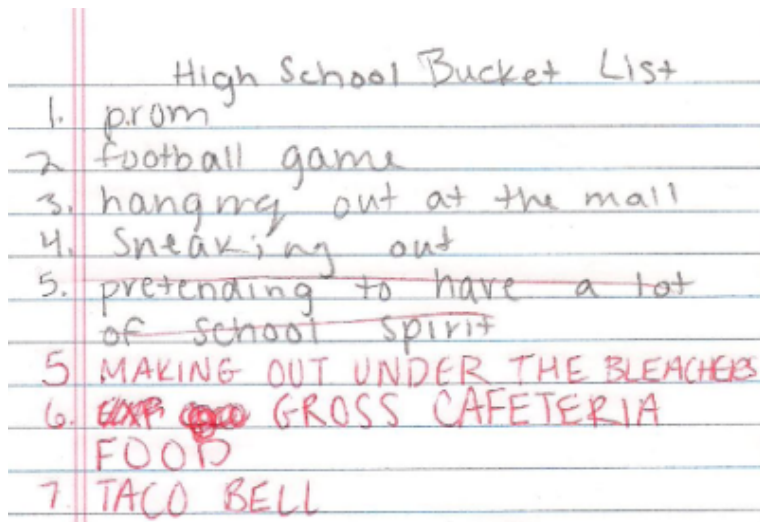


“Why would you even want that?” Mark snorts when Jackson briefly shifts out of the way so he can read, this time staying hunched over instead of sitting back up.

“It’s an average high school experience, isn’t it?” Jackson replies.

“Don’t you want *fun* high school experiences?”

“No, I want it to be *real*,” Jackson says, glancing back at Mark, his expression entirely too serious for their situation, before he returns to refining the bucket list.



“What is your obsession with disgusting food?”

“Is it really that bad? I hear about it all the time. Like, you know, midnight runs to taco bell?”

“That’s usually when you’re drunk.”

“Well, we’ll have to edit that too. I’m not old enough to drink and I have to be back at my hotel by ten.”

viii.

“Okay, just go get me lunch from the cafeteria, and bring it back here,” Jackson demands, after texting Mark asking for a ‘secret meeting’ that involved Mark arguing through a closed bathroom stall door that Jackson can’t tell him he has to do the secret knock if Mark has never been *taught*

the secret knock, and, why does he even need to do it, who else would be standing outside Jackson's stall trying to *get in*, what kind of experiences has Jackson had in America to require a *secret knock* to a *bathroom stall*, and why are they even meeting in the bathroom anyways, Jackson, this is *so* unsanitary. Suddenly, Jackson pushes the door open, his 'disguise' removed and sitting on his backpack, resting in the corner of the stall.

"Mark! This is on the bucket list. The bucket list that *you* wrote, may I remind you" Jackson ignores Mark when he interrupts to point out that Jackson was, actually, the one to write that he wanted to eat gross food from the cafeteria, "And you *know* that I can't eat in there."

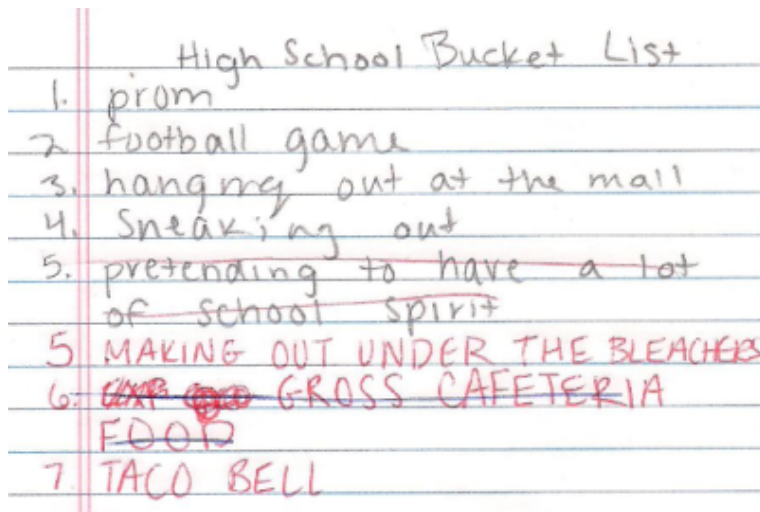
"Jackson, I really don't think anyone's going to pay that much attention to you. I don't think anyone will recognize you if you just sit in the cafeteria for twenty minutes," Mark argues, "or, at the very least, we could go sit outside, or in a classroom, or my dad's office, or, really, anywhere but the *bathroom*. We're even more likely to get caught *here* that we would be sitting in the principal's office. No one eats in the bathroom. What if someone comes in? And we're just sitting here eating? Let's just go somewhere else."

"No, Mark," Jackson sighs, heavy and overdramatic, "you don't understand fame. This is how I have to live."

Mark sighs too, even heavier and more long-suffering than Jackson's, but shuffles back out of the cramped handicap stall and into the hall, down towards the cafeteria, muttering the whole way about Jackson's fame going to his head and how he's weirdly obsessed with bathrooms and how he can't believe he's going to spend his senior year stuck in a bathroom stall for this dumb guy.

He does it, though. Mark goes to the cafeteria and picks out a burger that's probably not real meat because schools are cheap and they only budget, like, two dollars per kid for lunch but still tastes pretty good for himself and four of the nastiest looking things he can find for Jackson. There's a smashed, likely week old, peanut butter and jelly bar, some weird mix of lettuce and carrots that Mark thinks is coleslaw, a strangely colored, *almost* yellow pile of macaroni and a not-quite-brown salisbury steak with a thin, nearly clear gravy coating it. He gets it all piled on a tray and tries not to look as shady as he feels, glancing around when he sneaks back out the double doors into the hallway so he can deliver the gross meal to Jackson in the bathroom.

Despite Mark's constant protests about hygiene, and a long, rambling promise that *no one* there cares that much about kpop and they could *easily* get away with eating *anywhere* else in the entire school, they sit on the floor of the largest stall in the boys bathroom, Mark careful not to touch anything but the wrapper of his hamburger while Jackson happily tries every part of his meal. Jackson talks the whole time he eats, about Korea, and China, and his mom, a lot about his mom, interrupting himself every so often to give Mark an unnecessarily detailed review of his lunch, and then about how excited he is for the bucket list, and then some weird stories about what he remembers from being in primary school, and how hard it was when he was first picked up by his company, to go to school and then train all night afterwards, and through the whole thing, Mark finds himself a lot less annoyed than he expected to be, being forced to eat a shitty lunch on the floor of a semi-public bathroom.



"That wasn't that bad."

"I told you. Movies exaggerate. Why are you mad you didn't have to eat gross food?"

"I just wanted it to be real."

"It *was* real. The movies aren't actually an average experience. Do you want the real one, or the movie version?"

"The real one."

"Okay. That I can do."

x.

Mark and Jackson keep eating lunch together, but Mark eventually talks Jackson into upgrading from the bathroom stall to his dad's office.

At first, Jackson tries to get Mark to let him take him out to a restaurant to eat every day, saying his driver is always waiting in the parking lot, but Mark counters that most high school students don't leave to eat for their lunch period once in a year, let alone every day.

Jackson also decides, despite his claim that the meal wasn't *that bad*, he never wants to eat from Mark's school's cafeteria ever again, so they compromise, and Mark remembers to pack two lunches instead of one every morning.

They eat, and Jackson talks, and every day, Mark wonders how he had ever regretted, even as brief as it was, coming up with the bucket list.

xi.

"This isn't really a new experience," Jackson starts to complain thirty minutes into their third item on the list, hanging out at the mall, "I've been to malls before."

"Right, but it's not just going to the mall," Mark says, pushing past Jackson to feel the soft fabric of an on-sale jacket, making a note to come back the next day and see if it's still there, "it doesn't matter how many times you've been to the mall, this is *hanging out* at the mall."

“What’s the difference?” Jackson asks, turning to look at Mark, his hands still hovering over a shelf of slim fit button down shirts. Mark stifles the thought that Jackson would look really good in one.

“You probably only go to the mall to shop, right?” Mark assumes, and Jackson nods slowly, “well, we’re not shopping, we’re hanging out.”

Mark hears Jackson mutter, “this feels a lot like shopping,” but he doesn’t reply otherwise, so they both go back to browsing.

Mark has to stop Jackson from buying twelve shirts in three different stores, Jackson protesting loudly that it doesn’t make any sense for him to not buy anything, they’re at a *mall*, Jackson has *plenty* of money, but Mark just points out that Jackson is drawing too much attention to himself and they’re going to get caught if he doesn’t stop making a scene and Jackson settles and stops trying to buy everything he thinks might look good.

After ten more stores and an hour and a half have passed, Mark deems it enough to satisfy their average high school shopping experience, and Jackson mumbles about how they didn’t do any shopping, and Mark pointedly ignores him.

To make up for the window shopping that has Jackson acting cranky, Mark takes him to the arcade and lets him buy twenty dollars worth of tokens. They blow all hundred, split fifty-fifty, on what Jackson starts calling the Ultimate Skee Ball Tournament, that doubles as a race, the two of them fighting both to finish all their rounds first and end with the highest score. Jackson finishes first and starts bouncing around Mark excitedly while he’s finishing his final turn, waving his phone with his final score added. When Mark calculates his total score, he subtracts a thousand points when he shares it so he ends with a couple hundred less than Jackson.

He doesn’t even tell Jackson he lied when Jackson spends the entire walk to the food court boasting about being the skee ball champion and demanding Mark buy him a trophy for his efforts.

They kill two birds with one stone, getting taco bell in the food court and taking it to a bench in the middle of the mall. It’s quieter than usual when they eat their dinner, Jackson too excited or enjoying the food too much to keep up his usual non-stop rambling about his life and dreams that Mark loves to listen to.

“That *really* wasn’t bad,” Jackson decides, finishing his entire meal quickly while Mark is still slowly picking apart his second taco, “much better than you made me think. And, a lot better than the cafeteria food.”

“It’s alright,” Mark agrees, “most things are better than high school cafeteria food.”

The silence falls again, Jackson watching Mark slowly eat the rest of his taco.

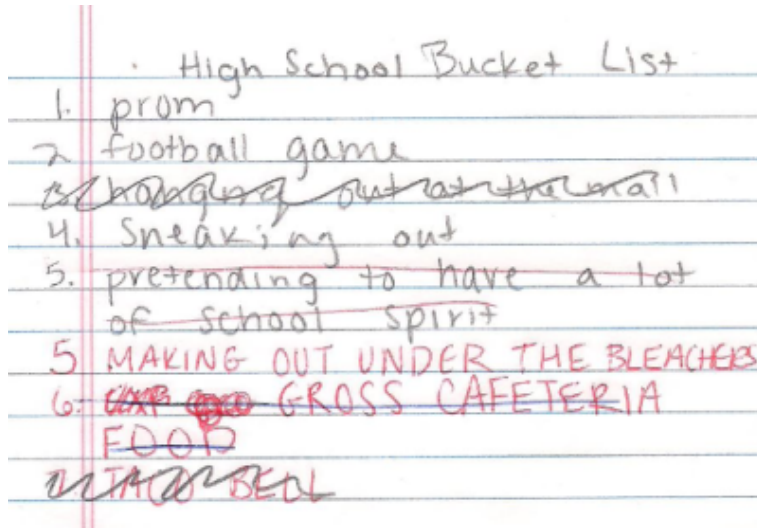
When Mark is done and gathering up all their trash to throw into the can near the bench, Jackson suddenly speaks again, “Thanks for doing this stuff. For me. You don’t have to.”

Mark stops, mid-movement, and looks up at Jackson, who’s looking down at his shoes. He hasn’t known Jackson for long, just over a week, but he *likes* Jackson. He likes Jackson *a lot*, and he knows more about Jackson than he does about some kids he’s known his entire life, and Jackson looks too serious, too calm, too insecure. Mark doesn’t like it, “I know I don’t have to. I want to. I like it, I like hanging out with you.”

“Yeah?” Jackson asks, glancing sideways at Mark, the most adorable little smile on his lips.

“Yeah.”

xii.



“I don’t understand why we didn’t buy anything in all those stores. You really liked that jacket.”

“We aren’t *supposed* to buy anything. It’s the whole point.”

“We bought the taco bell.”

“Shut up.”

xiii.

Mark fails to talk Jackson into painting his face obnoxiously in honor of Mark’s school’s colors to support their football team, and his old school t-shirts are far too tight on Jackson’s shoulders, even though Jackson tries to keep them on, claiming they just make his muscles look *really nice*. He does, at the very least, get Jackson out of his disguise, a hat with a hood over it, a pair of sunglasses and a mask, pointing out that it’ll already be getting dark by the time they go to the game and he’s going to look less suspicious walking in naturally with Mark, a well known member of the community, than he will if he tries to sneak in covering his entire face.

Just as Mark promised, no one notices the two of them or questions Mark about his new friend, no one even really looking twice as Jackson as they walk into the stadium with the tickets Mark bought them for two dollars in the cafeteria earlier that day.

“Are you sure you’re really famous?” Mark teases as they wander past stands filled with rows and rows of yelling teens and calmer parents, the game just starting as they walk towards the furthest set of seats, where students are far and few between and there’s no one to notice Jackson. It quietest back there too, and Mark doesn’t hate football, but he also doesn’t care very much, so it’ll be easier to talk to Jackson when he gets bored of watching his team (probably) lose.

“Excuse me, Mark, I am an international super star,” Jackson scoffs, and Mark just laughs as they climb the steps to the highest row, the top four bleachers all completely empty, sans the middle school couple tucked into the very corner, their heads dipped together.

“Is that what we’re up here to do?” Jackson jokes, nudging Mark with his elbow and gesturing with his chin towards the kids who, from their angle, seem to have started kissing.

“No,” Mark says, too seriously, unable to stop his cheeks from heating up in a blush, “we are here to watch a football game.”

This time, Jackson laughs at him, but he doesn’t push it any further, plopping down in the middle of the row with his plastic box of nachos that Mark *tried* to tell him weren’t going to be good.

Soon after the game begins, the opposing team scores, and Jackson jumps out of his seat to scream “TOUCHDOWN!” Mark quietly points out that they’re supposed to be rooting for the ones in orange, but Jackson cheers for the other team three more times, and after the second, Mark stops trying to correct him.

They’re focused on the game, or, for a while, in Jackson’s case, the nachos, for the entirety of the first half, but by the time the marching bands finish their half time shows, both boys have lost interest.

“Do you just want to go?” Mark asks, when one of the teams scores and Jackson doesn’t stand to do the touchdown dance he created during the second quarter, but claps weakly while slumped against the wall behind them. Mark’s pulled his feet up onto the bleachers, curling his arms around his legs to try and keep warm in the cooling October night air.

“No,” Jackson replies immediately, “we have to stay for the whole thing.”

“Plenty of people leave after half time,” Mark claims, scooting a little closer to Jackson because, *fuck*, it’s really cold and he forgot to bring a jacket, “it’s totally average.”

Jackson leans forward, squinting down the field towards the stadium entrance, and before he even sits back, Mark already knows that they’re staying until the end of the game.

Jackson asks him if he likes football, and Mark could answer with a simple yes or no, but suddenly their roles reverse and Mark starts rambling about how he doesn’t mind it, but it’s not his favorite, and he somehow gets started on basketball, which leads into eight other stories about his childhood that branch off even to even more stories, and all the while, Mark is scooting in closer and closer to Jackson’s body heat while the sky darkens further and the temperature continues to drop, and before he knows it, he’s discussing what he wants to do in the future, tucked into Jackson’s side with Jackson’s arm slung over his shoulders, listening with rapt attention, the football game going on in the stadium below them all but forgotten.

High School Bucket List

1. prom

~~2. Football game~~

~~3. hanging out at the mall~~

4. Sneaking out

5. pretending to have a lot of school spirit

5. MAKING OUT UNDER THE BLEACHERS

6. ~~CLUB~~ ~~GROSS~~ CAFETERIA
FOOD

7. TACO BELL

g

"That game was kind of boring. It was over hyped, I think."

"I told you. High school isn't as fun as the movies might make it seem."

"I didn't say it wasn't fun. I always have fun with you."

xv.

Mark and Jackson decide to space out their last three items on the bucket list over the last three weeks before Jackson's few appearances and concert are finished, figuring they have plenty of time to sneak out in the coming weeks, and Mark promises Jackson can make out under the bleachers as soon as they find someone suitable for the task that won't tell anyone. Mark doesn't tell Jackson that he's already planning their early prom for the night after his concert; he just confirms that Jackson is free and won't mind spending his last day with Mark. He'd take Jackson to his real prom, but it's not for another six months.

They still see each other, bucket list or not. Their standing lunch date is cancelled only on days when Jackson isn't in the school, and Jackson usually comes home with Mark for at least a couple hours after school, longer if he doesn't need to train or practice.

Today is one of Jackson's free days, and the two of them are lying side by side on Mark's floor, their feet propped up on the edge of Mark's bed. Jackson has a physics text book held up over his head, reading over a lesson from earlier in the school year. Mark still thinks it's weird that Jackson wastes his free time and puts in the effort to do the work for classes he isn't actually getting credit

for, but Jackson says he likes the learning, so Mark just plays quietly on his phone and half hopes that Jackson drops the book on his face.

“Hey,” Mark starts when Jackson, presumably, finishes his chapter and goes to grab a different book, “my dad said you knew French.”

“I do,” Jackson says, sounding far less confident than he normally does, “why?”

“Can you *rap* in French?”

“Mark, I am a professional. I can rap in any language,” Jackson claims, and Mark pulls his legs down off the mattress so he can roll over onto his side, facing Jackson.

“Rap for me.”

“Okay,” Jackson slides backwards until his legs fall before sitting up, crossing them and facing Mark too, “are you sure you’re ready for this?”

Jackson doesn’t wait for Mark to answer. He starts bobbing his head and after about four beats, he starts rapping, “Je m’appelle Jackson. Je suis dix-sept ans. Je habite à SK. Piscine. Piscine. J’aime nager dans la piscine. Poissons, poissons, mangent du poisson. Vélo. Eau. Bibl... Mark, why are you laughing?” Mark had covered his mouth with his hand when his laughter started halfway through Jackson’s rap, and he had, really, truly tried his hardest to hold it in, but he can’t help himself. “Jackson, you just said, ‘My name is Jackson. I am seventeen years old. I live in SK. Pool. Pool. I like to swim in the pool. Fish, fish, eat fish. Bicycle. Water.’ You really expect me not to laugh?” Jackson huffs and sighs and crosses his arms over his chest, looking anywhere but at Mark’s wide, shit-eating grin, and mutters, “I did not know you knew French.” “I really hope you’re not going to rap like that at the concert,” Mark tells him, still chuckling, “we do have a lot of level one French students who might catch you.” Jackson sighs, again, even heavier and turns his entire body so Mark can’t see his face, and Mark thinks he hears him mumble, “you’re the worst.”

xvi.

Mark decides to surprise Jackson with sneaking out, figuring it’s more realistic if he just suddenly tells Jackson to meet him somewhere.

He’s actually not really sure what’s realistic and what’s not. He knows it’s not going to be anything like Jackson expects, because Jackson had talked about big parties where everyone is drunk and someone brings drugs and there’s a bunch of topless girls in swimming pool in the backyard of a big house and the cops come and everyone has to jump the fence and run, which, really, had done nothing but lead Mark to conclude that Jackson has a shitty taste in movies.

Jackson’s whole idea of an average high school experience is not Mark’s average high school experience. He goes to school, and does his work, and talks to his friends sometimes, when he feels like it, or just listens to them talk, mostly about college. They discuss where they’re applying and their top choices and scholarship essays, and then sometimes they, like, go to the movies or study together, but, mostly, Mark goes home and eats a lot of food and then sleeps until dinner and then hangs out in his boxers playing video games or doing homework if he can’t get away with putting it off. He gets good grades and he’ll play basketball again soon when the season starts back up, which will cut mildly into his snacking and napping time, and once he figures out what he wants to do, he’ll start on college applications, but he doesn’t hang out or get into crazy shenanigans or go to parties and this is actually the first time he’s snuck out, even though he didn’t really sneak out, he

just told his dad he was going to help Jackson sneak out and he'd probably be back pretty late, but he'd be careful and he had some extra money with him and a full phone battery if anything went wrong, and they weren't going to go far, he promises.

Mark's not going to tell Jackson that part. It's not his bucket list.

Mark does his research, though. He watches some teen dramas and a couple movies and in the end, decides, even if it's not for a party or a date, the usual reasons one sneaks out, it's almost always spontaneous.

So, Mark doesn't say anything when Jackson asks about the bucket list the night before Mark's planned to complete item number four, and he won't say why he asked when Jackson questions him after Mark makes sure Jackson doesn't have any events scheduled for Saturday morning that would require him to go to bed at an acceptable time on Friday, and he says a simple goodbye when Jackson leaves his house after dinner, not mentioning that he'll be seeing him again in just a few hours.

Instead, Mark waits until ten o'clock, waves goodbye to his dad and takes the short walk from his house into the city where Jackson's hotel is. He texts Jackson while he's on his way, to give him time to sneak away from his manager, thinking as he gets nearer to the hotel that maybe he should've picked a later time when everyone would be asleep and he could just wake Jackson up.

He's surprised that Jackson is already there, loitering around the entrance of the hotel once Mark finally walks through the parking lot.

"You made it down here quick," Mark greets. Jackson gives him a strange, confused look in response.

"It's not that hard to leave a hotel, Mark," Jackson tells him, and his tone makes Mark feel as though he's said something dumb, but he doesn't question it, "what did you want anyways?"

"We're sneaking out!" Mark says with all the enthusiasm he can muster, slapping Jackson's shoulder, "the night is ours! We can do whatever we want! No rules!"

"So, what are we gonna do, then?"

It's then, with that one single question, that Mark finds the fatal flaw in his plan for the night. He doesn't have one. The entire plan was, walk to Jackson's hotel, tell him to come outside, but that's not *enough*. There's no point in Mark walking a mile and a half for Jackson to sneak out just to say hello. Mark can say hello any night, this is supposed to be special, and he didn't even plan anything.

"Well," Mark starts, looking around a little too frantically for something to inspire him, "we are, well, we..." Mark continues to draw blanks on what they're actually going to *do*, but he's hit with a stroke of genius on how to buy himself some time, "it's a surprise. Come with me."

Mark starts off in a random direction, hoping that something interesting and open will cross their path, Jackson following happily. It ends up working in Mark's favor, because Jackson immediately starts talking about the new choreography he came up with during the few hours they were apart, and he's so busy discussing the logistics of a flip that he doesn't seem to notice Mark has no idea where they're going.

He's even luckier, half a mile away from the hotel, when they stumble across a restaurant designed like an old diner. Jackson notices it from twenty feet away, and starts rambling about how he's only seen those in old American television shows, he didn't know they were still around, and when Mark finally sees what Jackson's talking about, he has enough impulse control to stop himself from blurting that it's actually just a chain restaurant created to look like family owned businesses, and instead claims that it's exactly where he was taking Jackson.

It's not until they've settled into the booth and ordered that Mark finds out, of course, he's not that lucky.

"You had no idea this place was here, right," Jackson observes, "you've been making it up this whole time, haven't you?"

Mark guffaws, and rambles a little too much when he calls Jackson ridiculous, saying it'd been his plan for weeks, but Jackson doesn't call him out on it, just gives him a small, knowing smile and continues to eat his burger.

By the time they finish, it's still only eleven, and Mark had already decided that he would keep Jackson out until *at least* midnight for the sake of prosperity. He doesn't have any other ideas. When he asks Jackson if he has anywhere else he wants to go and receives a no in reply, they end up just walking back towards Jackson's hotel, and then a little further, into one of the suburbs to wander the backstreets.

"Hey, you know what else I always wanted to do in high school?" Jackson asks suddenly, during a short lull in their conversation.

"What?"

"Hold hands," Jackson replies, and Mark is *so* glad the road they're on has no street lights so Jackson can't see the color undoubtedly staining his warming cheeks when his hand slides into Mark's jacket pockets, interlocking their fingers and pulling their hands out to swing between their bodies.

"This is nice," Jackson decides after several minutes of silence.

"Yeah," Mark agrees.

They walk like that for the rest of the adventure, Mark's blush and Jackson's wide grin exposed under the bright lights when they eventually make it back onto the city streets.

"I'm sorry," Mark says once they start nearing the hotel. He stops walking, Jackson still going until he's getting too far and their arms are both as outstretched as they can be from their connected hands. When Jackson stops too, he turns to face Mark, tilting his head to the side to look at the other boy with a confused expression.

"What for?"

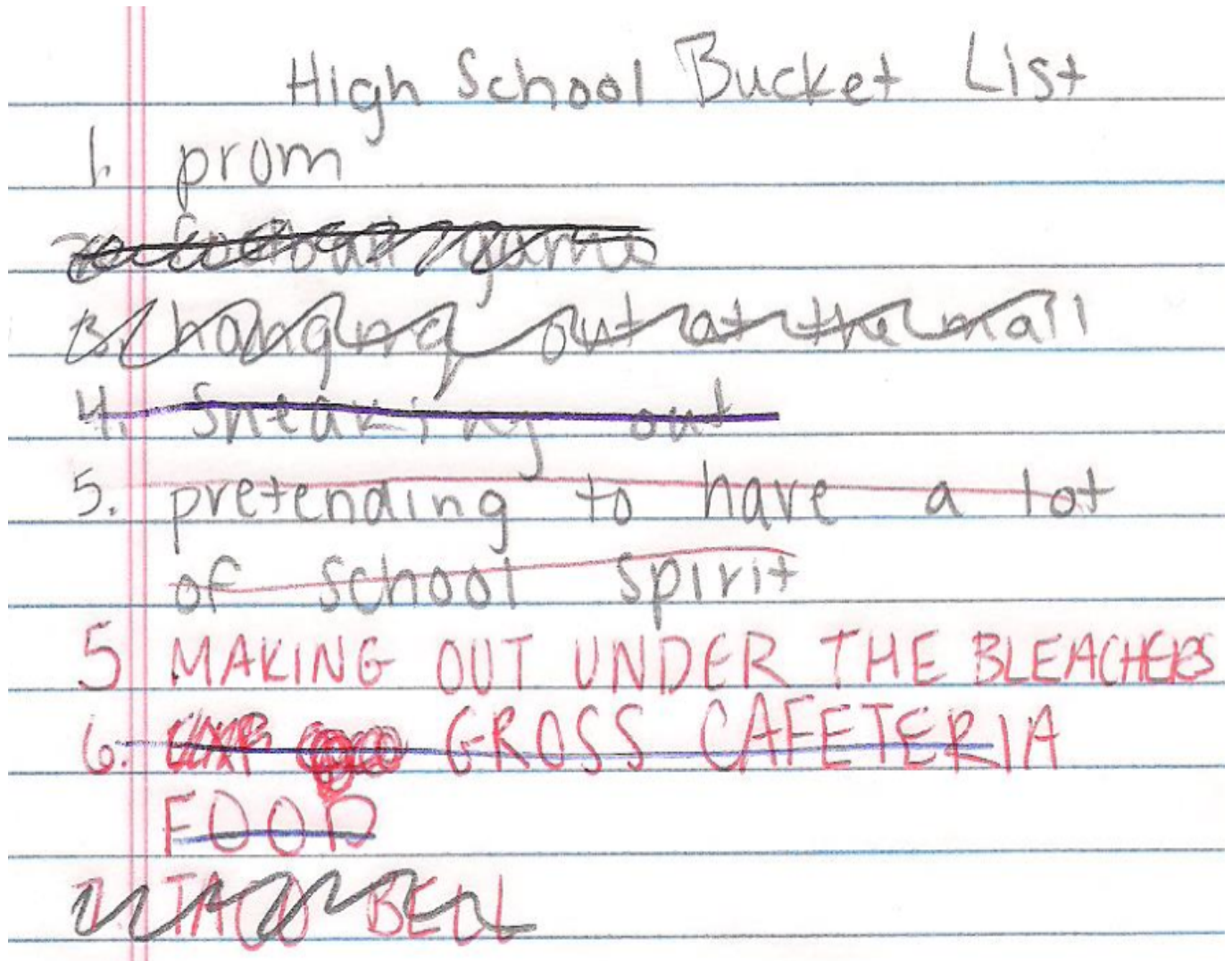
"I'm messing this up. It's nothing like... it's not what you expected, right? I'm too average for you."

"No," Jackson shakes his head, squeezing Mark's hand softly, running his thumb gently over Mark's, "I think it's better than what I expected."

“Really?”

“Really.”

xvii.



“Was your manager mad when you got back?”

“What? No, I told him we were sneaking out.”

“Then it wasn’t even sneaking out! You didn’t sneak anywhere! You just said, hey, I’m going out! We just went out past your bed time!”

“I don’t have a bed time! I’m famous! I’m a *star*. I can stay up as late as I want.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

xviii.

“We’re going to take a nap,” Mark tells Jackson as soon as they get to his house, already shedding his back pack and jacket and belt so he can roll into bed in his jeans and sweater. He throws that blanket half over his legs, keeping it folded so Jackson can slide in next to him.

“Why?”

“Teenagers are supposed to get, like, nine hours of sleep and no one does so sometimes you come home and eat a bunch of food and then nap or nap and then eat a bunch of food and then wait until ten to start four hours of homework, forcing you into the same routines. Naps are a staple for every high school student,” Mark explains, gesturing again to the open space on his bed and waiting semi-patiently for Jackson to lie down, “you said you wanted the average high school experience.”

It’s partially an effort to give Jackson the real deal, to give him a highly realistic high school experience in just under a month, but mostly Mark is actually just really tired.

Jackson does slide in, and they do nap, and when Mark wakes up with Jackson draped across his back, curled entirely around him with his leg thrown over both of Mark’s and his arms pushed under Mark’s armpits, hugging him close to his chest, he adds it to his brand new list of high school experiences he didn’t know he really wanted.

xix.

“So, we just have to find someone for you to make out with,” Mark says, watching the kids shuffling through the hall from where he and Jackson are tucked into the alcove near the doors that lead to the soccer field.

“Well,” Jackson starts, pausing for a full minute before he continues, “I think you could do just fine.”

Mark chokes on air, falling into a coughing fit before he can finally glance up to see Jackson watching him nervously.

“Jackson, I’m – “

“Besides,” Jackson interrupts, fidgeting, “isn’t experimentation, like, a big part of high school? Isn’t that something people do? Why not, Mark?”

Mark can’t argue with that.

Well, he can. He could easily. College is usually the standard age for experimentation, he hears, and he and Jackson are basically best friends after the time they’ve spent together, what if they ruin it, also, Mark hasn’t been in many relationships and he’s pretty sure he’s going to be a terrible kisser, especially to someone like Jackson Wang, who has probably gotten more action at seventeen years old than Mark will in his entire life, and, holy shit, his dad is the principal? What if they get caught?

The more Mark thinks about it, the more it seems like the worst idea either of them could ever have, but, he’s not going to pass up on this chance.

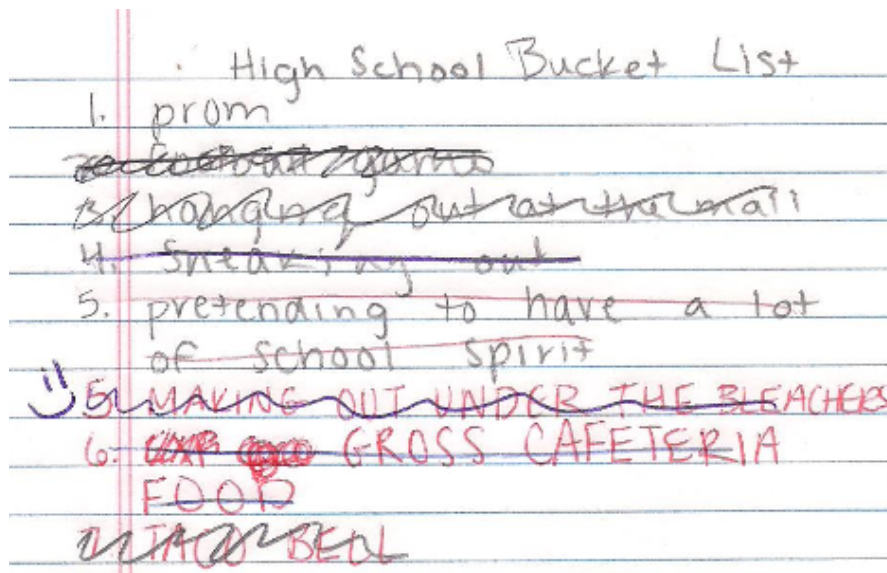
So, Mark takes Jackson’s hand and tugs him through the doors, glancing behind them to make sure no one sees them leave. His heart is racing dangerously fast, even before he and Jackson start sprinting through the grass towards the metal bleachers sitting on the far end of the field.

They make it under the seats, both breathing heavily, and Mark isn’t sure if it’s the run or his nerves or maybe excitement because, he’s actually been thinking about what it might be like to kiss

Jackson ever since Jackson sat across from him on a bathroom floor eating shitty food from the school cafeteria because he just wanted to try being an average kid, between taking classes he didn't have to, talking about how much he misses his mom and how the love his has for his job makes it worth it. He's been thinking about what it might be like to kiss Jackson Wang for weeks, and apparently Jackson wants to kiss him too, and Mark's heart feels like it's going to beat right out of his chest, and he and Jackson are staring at each other, standing under the bleachers and Mark can hear the bell ringing, signaling that they should both be settling into their seventh period classes and Jackson is leaning towards him and Mark's arms find their way around Jackson's neck and... and... and.

It's nice.

xx.



“Jackson, you’re such a loser.”

“You’re smiling too, aren’t you?”

xxi.

Mark meets Jackson in the bathroom – their bathroom – the morning before the concert to give him a, hopefully, almost, well fitting tuxedo that he rented with a vague estimation of Jackson’s measurements. Granted, they’re based off Mark’s best guess after eying Jackson regularly for several weeks and the feeling of his shoulders and his hips, which Mark’s hands explored rather thoroughly during their time under the bleachers, and that’s probably not good for accuracy.

“Pick me up at seven,” Mark demands, passing him the outfit.

“Aren’t we going to your house?”

“Just pick me up at seven,” Mark repeats, already walking back towards the door to the bathroom. He pauses just before he leaves, turning back to give Jackson a quick, unusually shy smile, “You look nice. Good luck!”

He doesn’t see Jackson again until the show, which is amazing. Mark has seen bits and pieces of it, and listened to Jackson talk enough about culture shock to have already heard most of the

presentation portion of the assembly, only more disorganized.

Jackson is a good speaker, though. Mark's surprised to see him stay so on track, but he does fantastically, hitting all his main points without digressing, making the audience laugh frequently with funny anecdotes from mistakes he made traveling between countries and moments when he made almost dangerous language errors. Mark feels special to have already heard it all before.

People like Jackson as soon as he starts, but they all go really crazy when he does his first song. He performs one of his recent Korean singles first, and he looks so *smug* when a portion of the audience is singing along, Mark *knows* he'll never hear the end of it. Following it, he does a song in Chinese, and then a short rap in French, one in which he's actually saying sentences instead of just random words, and finishes with a popular English song that has the entire audience going wild.

After the show, Mark hangs around for a few minutes, thinking he might be able to catch Jackson, but his peers rush the stage so fast and, knowing Jackson, he's going to stay until he talks to every single one, and Mark knows he'll see him later, so he hurries home to start setting up his basement as the best possible imitation of a high school prom as he can manage with forty dollars and three hours. He'd gladly take Jackson to his actual prom, if possible, but it's still six months away and Jackson has less than six *days* left, so, he has to get a little creative if they want to finish the bucket list before Jackson flies home.

It's not too bad, he thinks. He went for the cliché starry night theme, lining the ceiling with rows of dark blue streamers and adjusting the lamps for a dulled, mood lighting. Amidst all the streamers he hung large, glittering silver stars and in the corner of the room there's a moon piñata strung up. It's not filled with candy, but as the clock ticks closer and closer to seven, Mark spends a lot of time looking at it, thinking Jackson probably would've loved to have busted open a filled piñata at their fake prom.

His alarm rings at 6:30, and he's still not technically done decorating, but he takes a break to get dressed in his tux and lets his mom coo over him while she ties his tie even though it's not his actual prom, and he lets her take a couple pictures even though she's technically supposed to wait for Jackson to arrive. When he's done, he sprints back down to the basement, his mom yelling after him that his jacket is going to wrinkle.

Mark keeps working until the last second, taping a smattering of gold stars to decorate the white, concrete walls, carefully arranging the precooked chicken nuggets and bagged salad he almost forgot to buy after purchasing decorations to look less like a last resort and more like a nice meal. He places the plates on the small standing trays he found tucked behind the couch that he stood together and threw a cloth over, and tries to remember if he told Jackson that he should wait to eat until he arrives.

He's still frantically trying to get all the stars taped on the walls when his dad shouts down the stairs that Jackson's arrived, and he has to hastily hide the rest of the decorations and the plastic bags they came in under one of the couch cushions before sprinting back up the stairs. His mom meets him at the landing, brushing dust off his shoulders and straightening out his lapels before sending him to half-hide in the hallway so his dad can awkwardly greet Jackson and make vague threats about what might happen if Jackson doesn't have him back by midnight, just like they rehearsed.

"But, aren't we staying here? Aren't we going to be in the basement? We're we supposed to be going somewhere?" Mark can hear Jackson mumble, and even in the distance, he can hear how

distressed Jackson sounds. His dad laughs loudly in response, and Mark decides to make his entrance and save Jackson before his dad can go off script.

Mark walks through the doorway into the living room slowly, trying to pretend like he hadn't been waiting just around the corner for five minutes while Jackson stuttered and stammered at his dad's attempts at fatherly intimidation. Jackson gapes at him a little, when he enters the room, and Mark isn't sure if he's genuinely shocked by Mark's appearance or if he's just caught on to the extreme, high school movie prom clichés that Mark is jam packing into their evening and following his lead, but, either way, it makes Mark feel good. He immediately slides into Jackson's side, hooking their arms together to turn himself and Jackson around to face the kitchen where his mom is standing and ready to ambush them with the camera. She takes a few of the two of them as soon as Mark gets Jackson spun around, Mark watching Jackson's shocked face with a wide grin while Jackson is looking directly into the lens with wide eyes and an open mouth.

The family gives Jackson a few minutes to catch his breath, Mark's dad laughing hysterically and teasing Jackson about his reactions while his mom fiddles with the settings on the camera and giggles at Jackson's expressions.

"Sorry about that," Mark apologizes when Jackson gives him a faintly dirty look at the end of it, but he isn't sorry at all, "do you think your driver would mind taking us for a quick pre-prom drive?"

"Nah," Jackson replies, just as Mark's mom is calling them back for their official photos, "he thinks we're cute."

This time, it's Mark looking stunned while Jackson laughs at him.

Jackson's driver, whose name is apparently Andy, does *not* mind taking them out for a ride, and even tells Mark that he did a good job picking out the tuxes. He offers to take them on a full tour around the city, but, Mark remembers the food sitting in the basement and the three hour playlist he carefully crafted for him and Jackson in a three fast, one slow song pattern to last them exactly until ten thirty, when Jackson has to leave to get back to his hotel, and tells Andy just to take them around the block and drop them back off.

He holds Jackson's hand through the car ride and while they're struggling to get out of the backseat without ruffling their clothes and while he's leading Jackson through his house down to the basement, where he quickly starts the playlist at a low volume. Mark holds Jackson's hand right up until he's pulled out the plastic lawn chair he dragged into the basement for their makeshift dinner table for Jackson to sit in and pointedly doesn't think about that fact that it's their last night together until who knows when.

They eat, and Jackson just *smiles* at him the whole time, and he doesn't mention that the chicken nuggets are a little cold and maybe a bit overcooked or the fact that they're sitting at a shitty table in his badly decorated basement at eight p.m. on a Friday night while one of Jackson's dance songs plays faintly in the background and they discuss Jackson's performance, and it makes something in Mark's stomach flutter pleasantly, a feeling he never experienced until Jackson Wang came sweeping into his life.

The excited butterflies and the soft warmth in his chest and Jackson's bright grin make it so easy to forget that Mark may never see him again. He forgets while they finish off their half-assed meal and when he takes Jackson's hand after Jackson comes around the table to fucking *bow* to him, and

ask for a dance, and while they bounce around in the space he cleared out to be their makeshift dance floor.

He forgets when Jackson spins him around during the next slow song, and when he and Jackson awkwardly grind, laughing the whole time, making it more funny than sexy, during two fast songs.

Jackson's impending departure is the last thing on his mind when they hit the eleventh cycle, Jackson pulling him in close for the slow dance. If he was thinking about the fact that Jackson was *leaving*, that they weren't going to see each other again after that night, maybe ever again, he might not say anything. But, he isn't. Mark isn't thinking about anything except for the way Jackson's hands feel pressed firmly against his lower back, holding them chest to chest, their feet shuffling around each other as they sway in a slow circle, Mark's arms loose around Jackson's neck. He's thinking about how soft Jackson's hair feels against his forehead where their heads are dipped together, and he's thinking about Jackson's lips, moving gently with his when they kissed under the bleachers and how he kind of wants to do it again and maybe for the rest of his life. He's thinking about how unexpectedly nice the way his heart aches feels when he thinks about Jackson and holding Jackson's hand and the weeks they've spent together and the way he felt average and a little bored until Jackson came like a storm and shook everything up and made life interesting and magnificent and Mark feel so fucking *alive* and he feels so full of love, and, fuck, that's what that feeling is, it's *love*.

"Hey," Mark starts, soft and nervous, barely audible over the calm melody playing from his ihome, "I think I'm in love with you."

Jackson stops moving without warning, as soon as the words leave Mark's mouth, making him stumble and drop his arms away from Jackson's neck. He drops his head down to rest on Mark's shoulder. Mark hears a harsh, awkward laugh he doesn't think he's supposed to before Jackson replies, sounding pained, "Don't do this."

"Don't do what?" Mark asks, trying to keep the panic out of his voice, trying to ignore the regret pooling in his stomach, drowning all the butterflies in seconds, "Don't be in love with you?" He snorts, and hates the way it sounds, "It's a little late for that."

"This was supposed to be a good night," Jackson mutters against Mark's jacket sleeve and Mark doesn't know if Jackson meant for him to hear, but he does, and does it fucking *hurt*. He takes a large step back, hoping his eyes don't look as wet as they feel. Jackson's head falls forward before it snaps back, Jackson standing straight once Mark moves away from him, eyes looking a little wild, his entire expression horrified.

"Mark, I didn't – " Jackson stammers, but Mark starts talking over him before he can try to back track.

"I'm sorry for ruining your night. I didn't mean to," Mark is curt and guarded, his arms folded protectively over his stomach, and he can't look at Jackson, "I shouldn't have said anything."

"Mark, that's not what I meant," Jackson mumbles, scrubbing his hands over his face. In the background, the song fades out and a heavy, upbeat bass starts after it, "I just," Jackson's volume increases to stay louder than the music, "I just, can't, okay? Fuck, I can't, Mark, you, I, we, just, fuck, I gotta go."

And before Mark can say anything or trying to stop him, Jackson has already sprinted up the steps. Mark thinks he can almost hear his front door slamming, even from the floor below it, with the

Jackson's mind keeps jumping back and forth between 'oh my god, Mark is in love with me' and '*fuck*, Mark is in love with me'.

Jackson has been in love with Mark since the second he handed over the list. It was kind of impossible not to be. Mark was beautiful, really, inside and out, as cliché as it sounded, even to Jackson who had been living in bad movie clichés for an entire month. He's the prettiest boy Jackson has ever laid eyes on, after years of working with some of the best looking idols and actors currently active, and if that wasn't enough to capture Jackson's heart, he was so *nice* and funny, and Jackson couldn't remember having more fun in his life than he did in the weeks he spent completing the high school bucket list. Mark made one of his dreams come true, and in the process, cemented himself as Jackson's best friend, and there was no way Jackson could do anything *but* fall in love with him.

And that was fine when it was just Jackson. He never thought for a second that Mark could ever love him too. It was never going to matter, Jackson thought. He would enjoy the time they had together, and then leave. He was *leaving*. He was going back to Korea, to a life in the public eye, to a schedule even busier than the one he had during his 'break' in California, to his time zone, sixteen hours ahead of Mark, to his dorm, thousands of miles away.

It didn't matter when it was just him, but if Mark loved him too, they would both just end up hurt. What was Jackson supposed to do? Tell Mark he loves him too? And then fuck off to South Korea for the next several years without another break significant enough to let him visit? To give *both* of them false hope about this love meaning *anything*? Long distance is hard enough when it's just states or cities away, but they're looking at *continents*. It all seemed too impossible, and Jackson has two days before he was leaving, so he just... fucked it all up before it could break itself.

He just destroyed everything before they had a chance to hope, to enjoy any of it, when it wouldn't hurt quite as much. There was nothing else he could do.

Jackson gets so disoriented by the sudden painful ache that pangs through his chest, he misses catching his phone, which he had been absently tossing in the air while he mentally justified giving up what could've been the love of his life. It bounces off his cheek, the screen lighting up and making Jackson squint against the harsh brightness in the pitch black room.

By the time he gets his phone back in his hand, he's accidentally opened to his contact list. Looking at the first entry, Jackson's struck with an idea, and all his heart ache is washed away in a flood of hope as his finger presses down on the call button and he thinks, maybe, just *maybe*, there *is* something he can do.

xxiv.

Mark walks into school Monday morning, bleary eyed and a little miserable, thinking it's shockingly high energy considering the day and the time, Mark following in after his dad half an hour before the first bell rings. Everyone, or, maybe not *everyone*, but way more people than Mark's ever seen in the halls so early, is loitering near the lockers, clustered into small groups that are all whispering excitedly.

They're lining every hall Mark walks through, a significant amount of freshman, sophomores and juniors that really have no reason to be hanging around the senior lockers are making an ungodly amount of noise as Mark struggles around the throng towards his locker. One of his friends catches his shoulder as he's pushing past a group of girls, two of which are crying, and pulls him over towards three of his other buddies.

“Man, how could you not tell us?” The one that brought him in asks, giving him a friendly punch to the arm. Mark blinks slowly at him, his confusion increasing tenfold.

“What? Tell you what?” For a horrifying second, Mark thinks that it somehow got out that he was *in* with Jackson Wang, J-Flawless, everyone’s new favorite star, even just briefly. His friends quickly relieve his nerves.

“Didn’t your dad tell you? He would have had to say okay, right?” Another one asks, and Mark isn’t sure if she’s talking to him or Ryan.

“Tell me *what*? What’s going on?” Mark interrupts as Ryan’s opening his mouth to answer Becky, the words coming out far more agitated than he means them to.

“We definitely thought he told you, man, it’s some wild shit. That kid? From that weird concert we had last week? He fucking goes here now. He like, enrolled over the weekend, or something? Got shit done fast, he’s at his locker already, or something, everyone’s freaking out, and like, he’s a senior, I guess, so... Mark, where are you going?”

Mark thinks he’s in shock, Nick’s voice fading out just before he starts to walk away, his feet moving before his mind can catch up. He knows this school like the back of his hand, and while his mind is still repeating, ‘what the fuck’ on loop, his legs are jogging towards the only row of empty lockers left in the senior hallway.

His mind catches up just as he’s arriving, and he comes to a halt ten feet away from a locker where he can see Jackson. He’s turned away, the locker door half obscuring his body, but Mark knows it’s him even before Jackson shuts the door and exposes his face.

Before Jackson can see him, Mark realizes that Jackson is fucking *there*, enrolled in his school, has been since over the weekend, and no one told him. His dad didn’t tell him. *Jackson* didn’t tell him. Mark wasn’t important enough to know.

Just because Jackson’s there, Mark thinks, doesn’t mean he’s there for *him*. He wanted to be an average high school kid before Mark, before Mark came and fell in love with him and ruined it all, he obviously still wants to be, post-list, post-Mark.

Mark turns away, frozen, when Jackson slams his locker shut. He thinks maybe Jackson won’t realize it’s him, and starts to slowly walk back towards his friends.

He doesn’t make it three steps before he hears Jackson behind him, yelling, “Mark! Hey! Wait!”

“Yeah?” Mark says, roughly, when Jackson comes running up to his side.

“I was just about to look for you! What a lucky coincidence,” Jackson tells him, and Mark decides not to tell Jackson that he was actually looking for him too.

“What’s going on? Why are you here? *How* are you here?” All three questions come falling out rapidly, before Mark can process how he feels or how he wants to act or even, really, what he’s saying at all. He grabs the straps of his backpack and holds them tight against his body, swaying awkwardly from foot to foot as he looks anywhere but at Jackson’s stupid, smiling face.

“I asked my ceo if I could finish out the year here. I talked with the school, and with credit transfers and an extra class, I can technically graduate,” Jackson replies, catching Mark’s attention when he

starts to root through his backpack halfway through his explanation.

“So, what, you’re just... you’re just here now? All year?” Mark winces at how harsh his voice comes out.

“And part of the summer!” Jackson adds, excited, seemingly not offended by Mark’s tone, “I convinced them to let me stay on break, a real break this time, no work, until August.”

“Why?” Mark finally asks, the one question that he *really* wants an answer to, “Why stay here?”

Jackson hands Mark a slip of paper before he replies. It’s a list, a bunch of hastily scribbled items under a title ‘The Boyfriends Bucket List’. The first one already has a thick red line through it.

“I thought we needed to work on this next,” Jackson says, and all his confidence fades away into this cute, nervous, hopeful smile that destroys all the walls Mark had put up when Jackson first rejected him in one blow.

“You already crossed out ‘getting a boyfriend’,” Mark points out, waving the list while he’s fighting a smile.

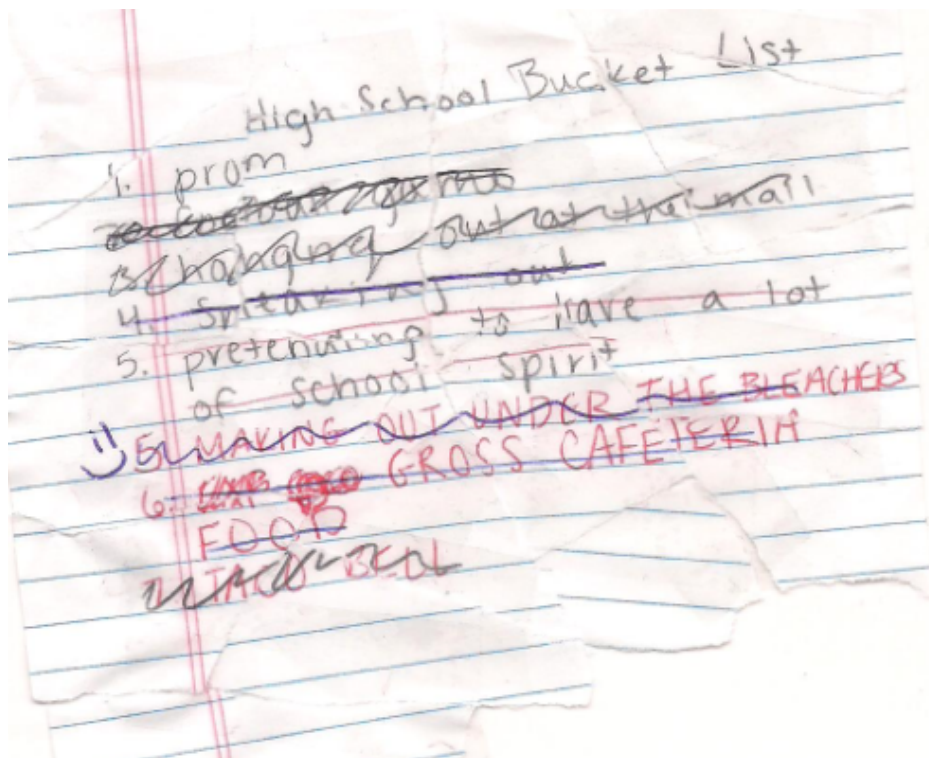
He doesn’t sound it, but Jackson says, “I was feeling pretty confident,” and gives Mark such a big grin that Mark can’t help but smile back, just as bright, “So what do you say?”

“About doing the list or being your boyfriend?”

“Both.”

“Yes.”

xxv.



End Notes

ive been working on this for so long oh my god it's finally done i hope y'all like it me and kai (kanginfucker on tumblr) worked hard on the plot for months and ive been writing for three days straight

also posted on jacksnwangs.tumblr.com

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