

Eddie watched the edge of his smoothie carefully as he carried it through the mall. His eyes were locked on the single, orange drop of liquid rolling inexorably down the side of the cup, inching closer to his hand by the second. He was carrying a small cup of ice cream in his teeth and a second smoothie in his other hand, leaving him no other choice but to fast-walk across the food court and get to the others in time. A soft groan left the rabbit's throat as he shuffled around a slow-walking group of teens, but a relieved sigh followed when he turned a corner and spotted Nick window-shopping.

"*Take it. Take it.*" he gasped through his teeth, pushing the dripping smoothie into Nick's hand. Unfortunately, the movement was enough to shake the droplet loose and it fell directly onto the back of Eddie's knuckle, leaving a sticky dot in his fur.

"Why didn't you get a napkin?" Nick asked. He held the bottom of the cup in his fingertips, held it to his face, and licked the side clean in one motion.

"Too late. Too far from the place. I don't know," Eddie said as he transferred the cup of ice cream from his mouth to his hand. "I didn't want it to melt."

"We don't mind it a little melty," Nick shrugged as he sipped his smoothie. He glanced over his shoulder and Eddie stood on the tips of his toes to look past him. Marcus was sitting on the edge of a planter with his back to them, staring down at his phone. They could see his leg bouncing with nervous energy.

"Has he been there the whole time?"

"Ever since I went into Spencer's," Nick said. He leaned over and nudged Eddie playfully with his elbow, whispering, "*It's the only place in the mall that sells dildos.[.i]*"

"We're in *public[.i]*," Eddie hissed, swatting Nick's arm away while he snickered. "Um...is he okay?"

"Might be just working up the nerve."

"It's been fifteen minutes." Eddie sipped his smoothie, chewing on the end of his straw, then glanced at the ice cream in his hand. It had already begun turning into a sweet, creamy soup. It was as good an excuse as any to check on Marcus, so Eddie hurried over with Nick following behind.

Marcus used to slump forward when he sat, but he'd gradually lost the ability over the course of his pregnancy. He was leaning slightly backward as he sat, his legs spread apart as his twin-heavy belly filled his lap. The shirt he wore was one of Eddie's, once big enough on Marcus that he could wear it as a robe around the house. Now, it was the only thing long enough to fully cover the rabbit's stomach without a patch of fur peeking out from underneath.

He had one hand atop his belly, drumming fingers against the taut surface like he was typing on an invisible keyboard, and his phone in his other. When Eddie looked over his shoulder, he saw Marcus was simply adding random numbers together on his calculator just to keep his hands busy.

"They were out of Reese's," Eddie said, making Marcus jump. "I got Butterfingers instead."

"That works. As long as it's peanut butter." He set his phone on the stone next to him and practically snatched the cup from Eddie's hand, tipping it back at his lips to sip the melted ice cream. Marcus wasn't much of a big eater before the pregnancy and rarely ate snacks. The twins evidently weren't having that.

"So...you get what you needed?" Nick asked.

"Uh..." Marcus chewed a heavy bite of his ice cream and swallowed. "I'm...working on it." He sighed, turning around and glancing over his shoulder. Directly across from them was a small store tucked between a Forever 21 and an PacSun called Motherhood Maternity. At the moment, it was filled with customers of varied shapes and sizes, all women. Marcus sighed and slid his hand across his belly, self-consciously measuring himself. Out in public, he had the benefit of the doubt. In there, it was obvious what he was carrying under his shirt.

"We can come back later," Eddie said as he sat next to Marcus. "Wait for it to clear out, maybe?"

“It’s not the people, it’s what they’re selling.” Marcus shuffled in place, adjusting his weight. He could feel the hair band he’d looped around the button on his pants straining around his widened hips. “It’s all too...sort of...”

“Girly,” Nick finished.

“Yeah...” Marcus sighed. “If it was just...*called* something else, y’know? That would help.”

“They’ve gotta have *something* in there you’ll like,” Eddie said. He scooted closer to Marcus and held the hand atop his belly, stroking a thumb against it.

“Even if they do, I still gotta go *in* there,” he said. Marcus squeezed Eddie’s hand and stared past him at the storefront, his eyes jumping between the exceedingly feminine mannequins sporting fake bellies similar to his own. The thought was making his chest feel tight and his skin crawl. The baby wiggling on the right side of his belly wasn’t helping, either.

“Fuck it. Forget it. It’s fine, I’m fine,” Marcus quickly said, shaking his head and raising his hands. “I’ll deal with it, it’s not a big deal. It’s just clothes, it doesn’t matter.”

“Are you sure?” Eddie asked, frowning. He could tell when Marcus was saying something for his sake. “We can think of something else.”

“I’m just being a wimp, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about me. Go to Gamestop or something, I’ll meet you-”

“Stay here,” said Nick as he quickly strode past the two of them, his long legs quickly taking him into the store.

“Huh?” Marcus sat up, his nose twitching. “What’s he doing? Did he say?”

“Of course he didn’t,” Eddie said, rolling his eyes. “...You’re ice cream’s melting.”

The two of them sat on the stone bench and watched Nick strike up a conversation with a skinny deer woman working behind the counter, animatedly pointing at a rack of maternity pants on the back wall. Marcus blushed into his ice cream and watched from under his hair, hoping and praying Nick wouldn’t point back to him.

“God, I hope he’s not doing it for me, he doesn’t even know my measurements.” Marcus rubbed a hand under his heavy middle. “Shit, *I* don’t even know them anymore.”

“Maybe he’s getting you something...unisex?” Eddie added, unhelpfully. He paused to sip his smoothie, the gurgling of the straw filling the silence. After chatting to a store clerk, she led him somewhere out of sight, possibly a dressing room.

“There’s nothing unisex in the *maternity* store,” Marcus grumbled into his ice cream that was becoming increasingly more like soup. After sipping it and leaving a dot of chocolate on his white nose, he glanced up to find Nick leaving the store with his hands in his pockets. “Oh thank God, he’s coming back.”

“So they’ve got some stretchy uhh...Leggings, I guess? They also got some like pretty normal-looking jeans that got this big black stretchy thing around the waistband,” said Nick, talking just as much with his hands as his mouth. “They really don’t look feminine or anything. Which one you want?”

“If you get anything without me, we’re just gonna have to return them,” Marcus said, gesturing past Nick. “You won’t know what fits me.”

“I know. That’s what I got this for.” Nick reached into his pocket and, like a magician pulling a scarf out of a hat, produced a long tape-measure he clearly swiped from somewhere inside the store.

“Did you take that?” Eddie said, inexplicably whispering.

“They’ll get it back,” Nick shrugged. He walked over to the seated Marcus and held out his hand. The expectant rabbit tucked his phone back in his pocket and struggled upright, wobbling in place and groaning as the weight of his belly began pulling on his back. Nick leaned over and gave him a peck on the head along with giving their shared twins an affectionate pat. “Bathroom, let’s go.”

Marcus glanced at Eddie, raising an eyebrow. He put his hands on his hips, thought for a moment, then shrugged.

“Worth a shot,” he said before leading Nick to the nearest bathroom at a slow, uncomfortable pace.

“Oh, I...I’ll be here,” Eddie said, finding his smoothie quickly melting into syrupy liquid and nursing it while keeping watch over Nick and Marcus’s snacks.

While he’d initially taken the lead, Marcus was quickly overtaken by Nick, who gradually inched ahead with his longer strides. Once they were side-by-side, Marcus slowed to a stop in front of a Foot Locker, leaning against Nick’s arm while catching his breath.

“You okay?”

“Need a minute,” Marcus sighed, grunting as he rubbed his lower back. His fingers found their way to his belly, where he massaged them into the sore spot just below his protruding navel, where one of the twins had been jabbing him for fifteen minutes.

“God, this would be so much easier with just one,” he said, stretching his back while using Nick’s shoulder for balance. “Even a big one.”

“Yeah...uh...sorry?” Nick chewed his lip and rubbed the base of his ear, trying to look apologetic rather than proud. Marcus caught his husband’s brief smirk and rolled his eyes before pulling Nick’s head down to his level and kissing him.

“You guys got a *lot* of making up to do,” he said, giving Nick a swift punch in the upper arm before shuffling away.

The mall bathroom was seemingly empty. Marcus was uneasy of the men’s room once his belly had started to noticeably show. A slight paunch was manageable, but he was looking more obviously pregnant by the day.

“In here,” Nick said, motioning to the empty handicapped stall at the end of the row. As Marcus shuffled past, he noticed one stall in the middle was occupied by a pair of hooves that coughed wetly. He was starting to think braving the maternity store was better.

Marcus latched the door while Nick sat on the toilet and waved him forward.

“Have you done this before?” Marcus asked. While seated, Nick was at perfect eye-level to Marcus’s belly.

“Nope,” he said, unraveling the string of measuring tape.

“Fantastic,” said Marcus, flatly. He rolled his shirt up over his belly, tucking it just below his nipples, and folded his arms to keep them out of the way. His jeans, while still comfortable around his legs, were straining under the gradual widening of his hips. Marcus hadn’t been able to bring the loop and button together for weeks and had to resort to holding them together with a hair band. On top of that, they were already becoming uncomfortably tight around his thighs and contributed to his awkward gait almost as much as the weight of his pregnancy.

Nick readied the measure, but stopped as his eyes lingered on Marcus’s swollen middle, just inches away from his nose. He slid his hand across the smooth, white fur, making sure to tap a thumb against the single black dot on the bottom-right.

“C’mon, you can do that at home,” Marcus hissed with a bashful look. “It stinks in here.”

“Just gimme a minute, okay?” Nick leaned forward and touched his forehead to Marcus’s belly. “You get to spend all day with ‘em. Let me have my moment.”

“Does your moment have to be in a mall toilet stall?”

Nick didn’t answer. He was lost in the moment, his head softly leaning against the taut surface of his husband’s belly, one hand gently stroking the side.

“You guys okay? Doing alright in there?” he asked the twins. Nick pushed his fingers into Marcus, firmly massaging them into his stomach. He pulled his head away and snickered. “It’s like testing a melon. Or a basketball. I could dribble you.”

“Nick...”

“Alright, alright, I’m doing it.” Nick sighed and pulled the tape measure taut between his hands. He made Marcus hold one end right at the center of his hips, then wound it all the way around

until they touched again, marking the number on his phone. He did the same around one of Marcus's thighs, then got the measurements from his waist to his ankle.

"You're short," Nick chuckled.

"No I'm not, you're just fucking huge." Marcus gestured to his belly. "If these are yours, I'm screwed. They'll be six feet tall by the time they're in middle school."

"Lucky for you that I'm a grower, not a shower," said Nick as he measured Marcus's inseam. "I was tiny before I hit puberty."

"There's *nothing* tiny in here," Marcus sighed wearily, a hand on his middle.

"Then they're probably Eddie's." Nick suddenly became quiet as he jotted down the next measurement.

"Hey. Hey." Marcus tugged on Nick's ear to get his attention and stroked his cheek. "It doesn't matter who's DNA they are, okay? It doesn't. The twins belong to all of us, no matter what."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know." Nick hesitated for a moment, then shook his head and waved the topic away with his hand. "It's fine, I'm fine. I got what I need, we're good." Nick put his phone in his pocket, then stood and immediately flushed the toilet. Pausing, he glanced at it.

"Oh. Habit."

"It's a good cover," said Marcus as he folded his shirt over his belly, where it tented in front of him with a single protruding dot in the center from his popped navel. He unlocked the latch and waddled out of the stall, ready to be outside before something gave him an infection. On the way to the door, Marcus glanced at his reflection in the mirror and stopped, gazing at his body in profile.

"Oh my God," he said to Nick. "Am I *really* this big?"

"Are you?" Nick said, flatly. "I hadn't noticed."

"Oh shut up." Marcus pulled his shirt tight, silently measuring himself. "I look *way* bigger than I thought I did."

Nick opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a sound from the occupied stall – a loud *ker-plunk* like a rock dropping into a bucket followed by a guttural '*Ungh.*'

"Alright, I'm done, let's go," Marcus said quickly, heading for the door as fast as he could move.

He and Eddie sat half-hidden behind a large planter while Nick returned to the clothing store with the measurements. Marcus stole half-glances from underneath Eddie's ears, but couldn't make out what was happening from a distance. After twenty minutes, just when Marcus was getting impatient enough to bite the bullet and head inside, Nick returned with a bag slung over his arm and an easy, triumphant smile.

Returning to the bathroom, Nick and Eddie waited outside while Marcus got changed, only risking an exit when the men's room was empty. His stride was already easier as he walked out, his old jeans slung over the crook of his elbow. They were stretchy in the parts the other pants dug into and hugged his thicker thighs without pinching them. Most noticeably, without a button or fastener, the waist of the jeans extended into a stretchy, elastic fabric that covered most of Marcus's belly, holding the pants in place comfortably.

"They make me look pear-shaped," Marcus said, stretching his legs out. "And they double the size of my ass."

"Who's complaining?" Nick smirked.

"But..." Marcus paused with his hands on his hips. After running a hand through his hair, he sighed and admitted defeat. "They...feel really, really good." He reached behind himself and struggled to pull the short tuft of his tail through the hole made for it. Once it was through, the last of his discomfort melted away and he sighed as the stretchy fabric lifted just enough of the weight off his back to keep it from hurting.

"You look really cute," Eddie said while tapping his fingers together.

"I guess. For like, a bowling pin."

“And somebody got a strike on you,” said Nick, wiggling his eyebrows. Marcus snorted despite himself and tugged his shirt lower while practicing walking. He was able to move more naturally than he had in months – where he once shuffled with an uncomfortable waddle there was only a faint sway in its place. The twins shifted, probably irritable at being even more squished than they were before, but their father was happy.

“Okay.” He spun on the ball of his foot to face his partners, letting a hand rest on his belly.

“Okay, fine. They’re winning me over.”

“Good!” chirped Eddie with a dainty little clap.

“I’m mostly happy I have something comfortable that aren’t sweatpants.”

“We could split the difference and get you some ‘jeggings,’” said Nick.

“Maternity jeggings?” Marcus snorted. “For my jegnancy?”

“Congratulations on the jaby. Is it a joy or a jirl?”

“ADAB: Assigned Denim at Birth.”

Nick and Marcus laughed while Eddie stood by with a confused smile. Their sense of humor was impenetrable at times.

“Alright, let’s get out of here,” said Marcus. “I’m scared if we’re here too long, I’ll actually have to *use* that bathroom.”

“Was it bad?” asked Eddie.

“Like combining a meth lab and a public swimming pool. If I stayed in there too long, the twins might come out with extra eyeballs.”

“And you say that like it’s a bad thing,” said Nick.

The three of them headed back the way they came, unhurried as they passed the stores, stopping every so often to comment on something they saw. Marcus walked ahead of Nick and Eddie, despite his slower gait, loping comfortably with a hand lazily pinned to his belly. It surprised him how much of his discomfort had been due to nothing but his clothes. While the aches, pains, and strains weren’t gone, the extra support from his maternity jeans made the simple act of walking so much more bearable. Not even a heavy, late-term twin pregnancy could hide the new spring in his step.

“Man…” Marcus grumbled as he came to a slow stop outside a mall Starbucks. “I would *kill* for coffee right now…”

“You could have hot chocolate,” said Eddie. “Or tea. Chai lattes are good, you want one?”

“No, I want a huge, piping hot, solid black cup of bitter coffee.” He sighed wistfully at the idea, his sensitive nose twitching at the scent of fresh grounds wafting through the open door as two middle-aged women stepped out. Marcus realized that his hands were idly roaming the obvious swell of his belly and he instantly dropped them to his side before they noticed. Neither of them gave him a second glance.

“…Actually, I’m good. I don’t want anything, let’s go home.” He discreetly adjusted the stretchy band on his new pants and continued on while Eddie and Nick shared a concerned look. Marcus glanced down at his body, a conflicted frown deepening on his face. He told himself he didn’t have anything to worry about; men’s bodies weren’t scrutinized the way women’s were. Despite how far along he was, no one seemed to bat an eye at what, to him, seemed blatantly obvious. Sometimes, he even wanted the attention; Marcus had fantasies of matronly old women fussing over his belly in the grocery store, giving him diet advice and sharing old wives’ tales about how to tell what the babies will be like when they grew up. It was a part of the pregnancy experience he would miss because he wanted to become a father instead of a mother.

Marcus was quiet all the way to the mall’s entrance, lost in his thoughts. As they stepped outside, Eddie glanced to the newest addition to the building and suddenly grabbed Nick’s arm.

“Hey, go keep him distracted.”

“What?”

“Keep him distracted until we get to the car. Don’t let him see-”

“Oh my *God*,” Marcus suddenly gasped, stopping in his tracks. Eddie sighed.

“Nevermind, he saw it.”

“When did the mall get a *Cheesecake Factory*?” His worries forgotten, Marcus’s feet carried him automatically onto the outdoor patio, his eyes wide and his tail wiggling happily.

“You know it’s only like 4:30, right?” said Nick, but Marcus was already settling into a table.

“It’s just a snack, I’ll be quick.” He smiled and politely greeted the waitress that brought over a menu and a glass of water. Awkwardly, Nick and Eddie were forced to sit with him.

“What about dinner?” asked Eddie. He was going to make lasagna tonight.

“I’ll have dinner, too. Eating for *three*, and stuff.” Marcus wiggled three fingers in the air, then flipped open the menu. “Would getting carrot cake be a stereotype? Oh *fuck*, tiramasu! Can I eat that? Is there caffeine in that?”

Resigned to a surprise afternoon dessert, Nick and Eddie sat back while Marcus basked in the decadence of Cheesecake Factory, stroking his belly under his shirt and asking the twins what they wanted to eat as if they had any opinion. He ultimately decided on a chocolate truffle cake that the waitress assured him was the size of his face. Eddie, not to seem rude, ordered a bowl of strawberries, which was apparently something he could get.

As they waited for their food, Marcus settled back in his chair and worked the soreness out of his feet while enjoying the cooling afternoon. Nick and Eddie sat with their backs to the mall’s entrance, so Marcus was the first one to notice they were being watched. A middle-aged doe had walked out with her teenage daughter and was standing on the curb, fiddling with her phone. She didn’t notice that her daughter had stopped a few feet behind her, locked in place as she stared at Marcus across the open space. He frowned, wiggling his nose, and gave the girl a small wave, prompting Nick and Eddie to look her way. The girl slapped her hands over her mouth, her ears standing tall on her head, then hurried to tug her mother’s arm, babbling wildly.

The girl ran across the plaza, her small hooves making light clicking sounds on the concrete, and stopped at their table, panting like she’d run five times that distance. Her hair was cropped at her shoulders and she wore black jeans rolled up her calves, a band t-shirt with an incomprehensible name, and a blue denim jacket with a rainbow flag button on it. “Uh, hey! Hi! Uh, sorry! But like. Um. Are you...uh...you look a lot like Marcus Blackhare. Are you?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Marcus said with a chuckle. The girl made a motion like she was trying to scratch her back while being electrocuted and gasped, her jaw dropping open.

“Oh my God, oh my God. I knew it, I wasn’t sure at first, but you...uh...H-Hi. I’m a big fan.”

“I can see that!” Marcus shifted in his chair and grunted as he worked himself upright.

“Oh! No no, you don’t have to get-” the girl began, but Marcus was already up, rubbing his sore back and tugging his shirt down. Despite the age difference, he was only a few inches taller than her.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. What’s your name?” he asked, while shaking her hand.

“Tiffany. Well, it’s Tiffany but nobody calls me that, they call me Tiff. My friends call me Tiff, anyway.”

“Then how about I call you Tiff?” Marcus said with a smile. “I might look a little rough, you caught me on an off day.”

“No! No no no, you look fine! I uh...” Tiff hesitated, fiddling with the buttons on her jacket. “I wasn’t actually sure it was you until I saw the...your...” She vaguely gestured to his belly, protruding far enough away from his torso to nearly touch her.

“Oh, yeah. That’ll do it,” he said, patting himself proudly. “I started growing out of my old clothes, needed to grab some new ones.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” Tiff said, but instantly caught her breath and winced. “Wait, that’s not what I...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Marcus laughed. “I’m having twins, I know what it looks like.”

“Hey, um, could you...are you gonna be here a minute? Would you mind signing something?”

“No problem, I’m not going anywhere.”

Tiff made a squeak, then sprinted back to her mother, dragging her by the arm out into the parking lot. Marcus sighed and lowered himself back into his chair, discreetly scratching himself underneath the elastic on his new pants.

“You’re in a good mood,” said Nick.

“She’s just a kid,” Marcus said with a shrug. “I happen to like kids, if you haven’t noticed.”

Tiff returned a few minutes later without her mother. Clasped in both hands was a worn copy of his first album along with a Sharpie with a piece of gum stuck to it. “Thank you, thank you *so much*. I feel like such an idiot bugging you guys like this.”

“It’s not a problem, happy to do it.” Marcus took the album and removed the cover to sign it, but lingered on the sight of it. It was a stylized, black photograph of himself on a white background. It was only a couple years ago, but he already looked like a different person.

“Is it okay? Should I get something else? I have a notebook in the car you can-” Tiff’s voice was rising into a panic, but Marcus waved at her.

“Nah, it’s fine.” He slid a hand over his pregnant belly. “It’s just an old picture.” He popped the cap off the marker with his teeth, scribbled a signature next to his photo, then handed it back to her. Tiff held the autograph like it would evaporate if she breathed on it too hard, then pressed it to her chest and made an excited sound like a gasping giggle.

“Can I have a hug?” Tiff blurted out. A moment later she shook her head. “Wait, nevermind. I was just kidding, I don’t-”

“Yeah! No problem.” Marcus hauled himself upright again and gave Tiff a friendly side-hug to avoid jabbing her with his stomach. It didn’t work.

“This is the best day of my *life*.”

“So far,” said Marcus. He glanced at Eddie and Nick, smiling as he felt their children moving inside him.

“No, I’m pretty sure this is it.” Tiff turned around at the sound of her own name and spotted her mother in an SUV, tapping her watch with her finger. “*Ugh*, I gotta go. Thank you *so much*, Mr. Blackhare!” Clutching the CD to her chest, the young doe *click-clacked* to the car. As she opened the door, Marcus heard her groan, “*Mom, Oh my God!*”

“That was really nice,” said Eddie with a wide smile. “You really made her day.”

“She caught me in kind of a mood, I guess. Everybody deserves that sometimes.” As he spoke, their waitress returned with a slab of chocolate cake as dark as the night sky, oozing syrup from every corner. Marcus sighed contentedly as he tore his fork away from his napkin. “Just like I deserve *this*.”