I didn’t make up my mind until Johnson tested my patience. It cemented my final decision, as an adult raccoon and a young man struggling to survive D.C.

I was exhausted, unfocused, more than hungry, feeling the effects of early joint pain in my ankles and wrists after hours of doing my job. I hadn’t even approached thirty yet. Yet my employer insisted I write a potential speech condemning protesters of the ongoing invasion of Iraq. Then, he wanted me to rewrite it, rewrite it again, then rewrite the rewrite of the rewrite. Plus, spend another thirty minutes cleaning up all the tossed or crumpled up papers into the shredder. I was feeling like one of the wholesome, All-American elderly folks he often liked to include in his reelection commercials.

The only thanks Representative Johnson gave me when I announced it was time for me to return home was a mild wave, then wished me a wonderful night at the restaurant. Hearing him innocently say it almost made me regret mentioning that I lived with my ‘dad’, let alone that me and my ‘father’ were having a celebratory dinner.

“So, Brian,” he asked, “Where-a-bouts you going tonight?”

“Nowhere.” I shrugged nervously, lying through my teeth as I said, “He’s cooking some mean burgers and we’re going to watch an old movie.”

In truth, I did plan on coming home an hour earlier. However, Rep. Johnson outright insisted I stay behind an extra hour. Hopefully, Barney wouldn’t be too cross about my tardiness.

“Oh, believe you me, that sounds like a whole lotta fun,” he laughed while turning a page of his newspaper. “You and your dad have a good time then, okay?”

 “Right.” I forcefully nodded to the older canine, “Thank you, sir.”

 “You betcha, kiddo. Good night, Brian.” Rep. Johnson continued reading letters and papers at his desk, only to be interrupted by his landline phone suddenly blaring. The portly, timber wolf let out an annoyed sigh, then toned down his thick Wisconsin accent when answering, “Hello, who is this? Craig, it’s been too long! Have you seen the SCOTUS arguments yet? The oral arguments? I know, I know, liberals will say anything nowadays…and that A.G.’s arguments were the worst I’d ever heard!”

 Rather than wait long enough to be asked to do overtime (again), I made a beeline out of the office. Johnson had already kept me hostage long enough for me to miss the rush of taxicabs waiting outside. So, I didn’t give him another opportunity to ruin my evening. I flashed my congressional staffer’s badge to the feline security guard, patiently let him wave his wand around me. Then, I grabbed my suitcase as I walked down the front steps of the Capitol Building.

 Once upon a time, I used to be amazed by how beautiful the rotunda looked. Starting off as an entry-level staffer for Congress, I used to feel like a President each time I waltzed up the pristine marble steps. Years later, I could say with confidence that I no longer viewed the rest of D.C. through rose-tinted glasses. The naivete in me gradually receded the further I worked for politicians and lobbyists. I saw behind the façade of American politics, especially when the cameras turned off or the doors closed shut.

 I could go on and on about the various things seen, but it didn’t matter. No matter how shrewd, hypocritical, or downright Machiavellian my employers often were behind the scenes, I couldn’t blame all of my past employers. If anything, I understood the secrecy on some level. No successful politician or homosexual in history ever lived a comfortable life by speaking their honest mind to everybody they met.

 After hailing a taxicab and paying the fare, I let my fatigued mind deflate from the tumultuous day. Sitting in the backseat felt like a hotel mattress (compared to the uncomfortable chairs I often sat in while following Rep. Johnson around), I let my raccoon tail uncurl into a relaxed position, unfastened my work tie, then allowed my toes to stretch inside those expensive shoes I hated wearing. My eyes gazed out the left side window as the dying rays of sunlight cast the Washington Monument in a purply-orange glow, then to the driver.

 “Sheesh, you sure look beat!” The Labrador behind the wheel commented as he looked at me through the rearview mirror. “Long day at the office?”

“My employer’s office suffered a nuclear bomb of paperwork,” I groaned, which led to the dog laughing. I ended up chuckling too. “At least I’ve got tonight and tomorrow off.”

“Great to hear.” The driver craned his muzzle to look at me. “Where to?”

I recited the destination by heart, then asked, “Can you get me there as fast as you can? I’m late for dinner. The damn boss insisted I stay an extra hour.”

“Ah, okay then,” the Labrador chirped as he guided the taxicab into the lanes. “I take it you’re late for an anniversary dinner or something?”

A small smile crept up my snout. “You can say that.”

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No matter how much things changed or stayed the same, I still couldn’t get over how beautiful Washington, D.C. looked by nightfall. Walking or driving, nobody was blind to the majesty of illuminated monuments once it became dark and the strategic street lighting kicked in. Tourists went on evening expeditions to see historic sites across the National Mall, a few dedicated activists still carried signs for driving mammals to read at stoplights, some politicians started retiring to their homes, and underappreciated staffers like me returned to empty dwellings. Luckily, I didn’t have isolation to look forward to, or a noisy roommate.

The apartment I shared with my ‘father’ was a rustic townhouse resting near Dupont Circle, not too far from Lambda Rising, our favorite bookstore. Before the events of 9/11 and the D.C. sniper attacks, I often liked to stroll the scenic distance home, especially if the weather was beautiful or if I planned to meet Barney somewhere for dinner. Unfortunately, due to lingering paranoia from Barney and my current employer, they separately insisted I no longer walk back to the townhome on my own. Night or day, good weather or bad, they wanted me to take taxis. Especially after anti-war protests from the prior week blocked traffic.

Neither wanted me to be arrested by accident, or worse; mugged at knifepoint. Because Barney loved and cared for my safety and because Rep. Johnson sounded like he cared, but likely didn’t want to bother paying bail. Hell, the old wolf would probably ask me to star in a new reelection commercial.

Watching the sidewalk blur past the moving cab made me feel melancholy for those days long since passed. Not even two years since that fateful day on September 11th, and America had transformed in so many ways. Airport security took longer to go through, the news never stopped talking about the latest terrorist plot being thwarted, and politics seeped in almost anything and everything Americans did in their downtime. It made me miss the old days when all that Barney and I needed to worry about was remaining deep in the closet.

“Have a good night,” the Labrador taxi driver told me after I’d paid the fare. “Have fun on this anniversary date of yours!”

“Thanks.” I nodded to the dog before he drove off.

Sighing to myself, I pushed everything else to the back of my mind, then smiled at seeing the townhouse’s front steps. With a wearied swish of my bushy tail, I walked up to unlock the entrance door, slipping inside to my true home.

The two-story townhouse we called our sanctuary had only been rented for five years, but it had felt like it was much longer. Call it adoration for the interior layout or how much Barney loved decorating the walls with delightfully kitsch paintings crafted on his days off, all that mattered was the older raccoon lived there. As my adopted father and much more.

Closing the door behind me, I spoke out, “I know I’m late and I’m so sorry.”

Movement from the kitchen led to a taller, older raccoon in jeans and a plaid shirt appearing into the connected living room. The disappointment melted into concern and relief when his endearing mahogany eyes fell on me.

“Good Lord, Brian,” he groaned while stepping forward to take my jacket. “No phone calls, no text messages, you had me worried.”

My ears partly folded. “I’m sorry, honey. I got caught up at work and couldn’t call you without using the boss’ line. I won’t forget to slip you a warning next time.”

“You shouldn’t have me worried again,” he chastised me as I started walking up the narrow staircase leading to the second floor. I didn’t see him frowning. “So, mind telling me what Mr. Ted Johnson begged you to write for him this time?”

“Can’t say,” I tiredly replied. “You know I can’t talk too much about work.”

“Hmm, since it’s all anybody’s talking about on the news,” he mused at the bottom of the stairs, watching me walk slowly upwards. No doubt enjoying the sight of my younger raccoon tail too. “I bet it’s either about the sodomy law case or the Iraq invasion, right?”

“Can’t say,” I replied again.

“Are you going to tell me or just be a good little staffer?” He snickered.

“Hmm.” I slowed my steps. Mulling over the consequences of telling Barney and if knowledge of what I’d revised could be leaked, my lips pursed together into a grin as I repeated to the older raccoon, “…can’t say.”

“Anyway, you get refreshed, and we’ll figure out what to do for dinner, okay?”

“Sure thing, Barney.” I smiled down to my rock in the chaotic storm of D.C.

When we first moved in together, we barely had the clothes on our backs. Looking at the photos and drawings that lined the walls of the second story though, it made me appreciate how much time went by since I first asked the big question. From the time when he said yes to the present day, times had been tumultuous, but they felt miniscule compared to happier moments, like our fifth anniversary trip down to Myrtle Beach, a moment from which hung in a frame on the left wall of the bathroom door.

I lingered for a moment at the photograph. It’d been taken by a fellow friend in the closet, who also brought his husband from Amsterdam to celebrate their European marriage. We faced the Atlantic Ocean, arms wrapped around each other as we posed in front of a crashing wave, wearing only our swim trunks and matching grins. Had I lost weight since then?

A low growl in my stomach compelled me to go take that shower. My sore body guided itself into the bathroom sitting opposite our shared bedroom. Seeing a pair of clean clothes neatly folded on the closed toilet seat made me pause midway through stripping down, and silently remind myself to make it up to the wonderful man later that night.

Overall, a hot shower and therapeutic brushing of my gray-and-black fur helped greatly. My heartbeat slowed, my limbs didn’t crackle like an arthritic masochist, and I didn’t even think about Rep. Johnson. Nor ponder on if the final draft I’d helped write for him would be good enough in the event of Saddam Hussein’s capture. When working as a congressional staffer, one needed to always be hypervigilant at the office. On a whim, the employer might change details of a speech at the last minute, require a meeting scheduled one minute to be rescheduled the next, or ask me to follow the congressman across the city for important events. Most often, they were half-baked fundraisers in local businesses.

Still, my decision had been made, and I planned to tell Barney about it as soon as we had supper. Nothing else mattered. All the stresses of the long day washed down my fur, trickled into a pool at my toes, then emptied into the drain. It left me feeling like a baptized baby.

“So, why day clothes instead of pajamas, Barney?” I asked the raccoon once I’d made it downstairs into the living room. “Aren’t we staying home?”

I peered over the descending banister to find Barney dressed in casual night clothing too, putting on his evening jacket and snatching mine from the nearby coatrack. His smile lit up upon hearing my voice.

“We don’t have to, Brian.” He smiled, then proposed, “You seemed so stressed out, and I’ve been too busy today at the university too to get the stuff we needed before coming home. So, why don’t we go out to eat this time? Since it’s our anniversary and all.”

My tail swayed at the thought of eating food we didn’t need to cook.

“Eh, sure. Why not?”

His grin brightened like Lady Liberty. “Sounds good then, son!”

“Ugh, please don’t call me that.” I shuddered as my bare feet touched the hardwood floor at the stair’s bottom step. “Johnson calls me that, and it’s bad enough I have to tell everyone you’re my father.”

“But I am your daddy, in a sense,” Barney said, smirking as I rolled my eyes again. “Now, now, you begged me to sign the adoption papers exactly seven years ago today, didn’t you?”

A heavy sigh escaped my lungs. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Now, are you ready to go out to dinner, *son*?”

My tail shuddered again, much to his amusement. As much as I loved him, Barney was deplorable in finding ways to make the situation weirder than it needed to be.

“Sure am, *daddy*,” I spat out to the giggling raccoon, who then helped me into my jacket and caressed my elbows. Staring into his handsome mahogany eyes again made me instantly forget everything else. “I love you, by the way.”

“Heh.” He leaned close to my lips, “I love you too, Bri.”

Barney and I didn’t share one drop of blood. Not a single drop. In fact, the older raccoon guiding me into a passionate kiss happened to be only fourteen years my senior yet looked the part of a middle-aged father. Anybody who investigated each of our public records would clearly see that, as well as other interesting things like how my biological sperm donor lived in northern Florida with my mother and siblings. Meanwhile, his parents were long dead, and his extended family wanted him to stay uninvolved in their lives. If anything, the closest that me and Barney could ever be genetically related was in terms of matching species.

With no state in America allowing gay couples to marry, it made the most logical sense at the time. Having Barney adopt me prevented any intolerable outsiders from getting in the way of inheritance, further solidifying me into his will as family, as well as allowing me visitation rights to a hospital if Barney’s cancer ever resurfaced. The papers gave all the benefits of a marriage without going to a judge. If Representative Ted Johnson ever knew the truth about me and my adoptive father, I bet the old timber wolf would probably suffer a heart attack.

At best, he’d simply fire me and then blacklist me from ever working with other congressmen again. Whatever helped punish me for being in love.

Our lips parted after a long, sensual kiss, and I smiled goofily up at the older raccoon.

“Thanks, I needed that,” I mumbled.

 “No problem, sweetie.” He beamed, then clasped my fingers with his. “Let’s get going.”

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 We decided on ‘Tommy’s Place’, a classic diner somewhere near the border of Maryland. The eponymous tiger was a dear friend from Barney’s adventurous years who owned the diner as well as liked catering as a side business. If anybody ever asked who he catered for the most, Tommy’s only answer would be, with a twinge of loathing venom, “Them politicians.”

 When we arrived, those sitting down for supper in the vintage booths mostly consisted of workers dreading the beginning of third shift, or an old couple discussing their extended family and the evening news. During a modest service, Tommy himself assisted in waiting tables while also taking the time to be a second server. The instant we stepped in, and the tiger caught sight of us, his forced smile softened up.

 “Barney, Brian, my friends!” He purred while happily stepping forward to shake our paws. “I didn’t expect to see you two here, and tonight of all times! You want the usual seat?”

 “If it’s not taken already,” I suggested.

 “Of course, of course,” the boisterous feline said. He glanced at the other server, already in the middle of talking to the older couple at a table. “Right this way, right this way, please.”

 The booth in question happened to be in the far corner of the diner, far from listening ears. Since we valued our privacy but didn’t want to spend each outing dancing around certain topics while getting dirty looks from eavesdroppers, we preferred the spot. Still, we’d have settled on another if somebody else had taken it ahead of us either way. Fortunately, it wasn’t the case for the night.

 I slid into the cushioned seat after placing my jacket inward, then rested my elbows on the table as Tommy handed Barney a menu.

 “I take it you’re going for the sirloin steak again?”

 “You know me like an old book, Tom.” Barney handed the menu to me. “Can I have a salad instead of French fries though? Doctor says I need to avoid fried food if I wanna keep this old colon healthy.”

 “So, a bullshit salad, got it.” Tommy scribbled down on his tiny notepad. “Do you want a Caesar’s or southwest chicken?”

 “Southwest,” Barney muttered, then added, “And can I get some extra croutons?”

 “Sure thing, sweetheart,” the tiger chirped, then turned to me. “What about you, Bri?”

 “Uh…I’ll have a bacon ranch wrap.” I went for the usual. “And two bottles of Böhmener beer, if you still have some?” My tail wagged against the seat behind me. “It’s our anniversary.”

 “Seven years tonight, Tom,” Barney chimed in with a bright grin.

 “Congratulations, you two!” Tommy trilled happily for us. “I should have a couple bottles in the back. You two just get yourselves settled, and I’ll have either myself or Gerry bring you your food. Congratulations, again!”

 We thanked the tiger again, then relaxed into our seats. As we waited for our food to arrive, Barney and I slipped back into a casual conversation. We tried our best to avoid talking about work, but it was easier said than done, given his best stories came from what happened to him during his classes at the university, and I couldn’t mention the details of my workplace. We did talk about our (low) opinions on the invasion of Iraq, how much it played into Barney’s lectures, and how much he disapproved of some students not taking current events as seriously.

 “So, Jacobs asks how I know he’s looking down at his flip phone during my lecture,” Barney stifles an immature giggle, “and I tell him, ‘Nobody looks down at their own crotch and smiles unless they’re a narcissist, or they think I’m an idiot.’ He then makes a wisecrack about me being the latter, brings up how I’d likely smile at his crotch, and I tell him to leave my class.”

 “Political Science doesn’t have a place for snark, huh?” I quipped at the elder raccoon.

 “Nah, it totally does!” He shakes his muzzle in a smirk, despite the circumstances. “I don’t have room though for bratty students who think they can interrupt my lectures with low-brow jokes. At least be imaginative, and I’d not be as annoyed, y’know?”

 “I can understand,” I shrugged, “but did you need to be open with your class about us?”

 “Is this your paranoia kicking in again, Bri?” He queried, to which I didn’t respond. “I keep telling you, the university doesn’t care. As long as I do my job and keep teaching the students, it won’t bother the higher-ups. Hell, Mrs. Dulvaney in art theory has her own girlfriend, and she’s been teaching since Reagan got reelected.”

 “I know, I know.” The exasperation in my voice slowed down. “I’m just worried sometimes that you might give off too many hints here and there to your students, and they’ll try to blackmail you when they find out…well, you and I technically—”

 “Would you believe me if I said a former student tried that?” He asked.

 “Really?” I gasped in disbelief, sitting straighter. “He blackmailed you?”

 “Tried to.” Barney corrected me. “He tried extorting me a couple weeks ago, saying he’d go to his lawyer daddy saying I spent all my time hitting on the twerp if I didn’t turn his D’s and F’s into B-pluses. Well, I called his bluff, then informed the Dean he wasn’t welcomed in my lectures anymore. The last time I saw the kid, he was giving me an apology letter explaining why he couldn’t attend my classes anymore.”

 “Huh.” My tail curled and uncurled against the seat. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

 “I didn’t want you to worry.”

 “Didn’t want me to worry?” I echoed his words.

 “You know I love you,” he told me, softly smiling at me behind his raccoon mask. “But you shouldn’t let your job keep making you think that everyone’s out to figure out where all the homos are. Most of the time, they don’t even think we exist.”

 “Even if we’re waiting their tables or filing their paperwork.”

 The older raccoon scoffed, smirking back at me. “You’re not wrong there, Bri,” he remarked, then settled into his seat as we saw Gerry bring our food out of the corner of our eyes.

The young fox set our respective plates in front of us, and we silently thanked him while letting the pleasant smells waft into our whiskers. Barney delicately sliced the juicy steak into smaller morsels while leaving his salad on the side for later. Meanwhile, I already chewed on a bite full of my chicken wrap as he commented on the steak.

“Tommy never disappoints,” he remarked happily, which I nodded to. My ever-observant half didn’t ignore it. “Is something on your mind? You’ve had this look on your face since you came back to the house.”

I carefully set my steaming hot chicken wrap down with both paws, then wiped my fingers clean of grease. Inhaling and exhaling, then convincing myself that Barney would support me no matter what, I made my choice. I told him about my decision.

“I’m…thinking about quitting.”

The elder raccoon dropped his fork and knife onto the plate but didn’t glare at me like I’d expected. Instead, he picked up his utensils, then neatly set them on a folded napkin. His wide eyes narrowed at me, seeing if I was serious.

“At least, after the next presidential election, after we see if Johnson does well or not.” I added. “I’m just…tired. I’m tired of my career, tired of being a lackey, tired of keeping secrets from my bosses, and tired of keeping things from you. I-I just can’t keep doing this, and I know you’re not a big fan of change or anything, but—”

 “What makes you think I’ll be mad at you, sweetie?” Barney patted my paw as it lay resting on the table, next to our bottles of Böhmener. “And what makes you think I hate a change of pace? Sudden change? Sure, but not gradual change.”

“You’re not a fan whenever I change congressman,” I pointed out as I started staring down at my abandoned meal on the greasy plate. “After I started working with Johnson, you could’t stop frowning anytime I bring up work or my boss.”

“Yeah, well that’s because the dude’s an uptight, homophobic prick,” he brought up.

A retort died out on my pursed lips. “…alright, you got me there.”

A lewd chuckle escaped the back of Barney’s throat. “If only he knew his righthand man was a homo, and he’s bringing his daddy out for dinner.”

“Oh, God!” Pulling my paw away from his, I buried my eyes into my palms as Barney cackled at my reaction. If we weren’t out in public, I would’ve said a few colorful words in his direction. “Ugh. You’re so lucky I’m the forgiving type, Barney.”

“That I am,” he laughed while grabbing his utensils again. “Now, what have we learned today in class, Brian? That change is only bad if we don’t learn from it, or if we react like it’s the end of things? And that you shouldn’t expect the worst from your partner after seven years?”

“Yes, Professor,” I replied, rolling my eyes as I snatched my own utensils.

 “Especially if it makes you happy,” he added, giving me a reassuring smile after swallowing a large slice of the (admittedly) delicious-looking steak on his plate. “If you want to change careers, why should I be angry with you?”

 “I didn’t think you’d be angry, Barney,” I clarified to the big lug, resting my fingers on his. “I just thought you’d be frustrated, since we’re still paying off the mortgage, the car loan, our bills—”

 “All of which is going to be fine.” He told me. “It’s like you said, you at least want to wait until next year. Plenty of time for you to figure out what you wanna do, whatever it is. I love you, Bri.”

 Once again, my worries disappeared. My tail swished freely on my lap as I beamed back at my boyfriend, my partner, my mate, and adopted father. All rolled up into one.

 “I love you too, Barney.” Reaching for our bottles, he did too as we made a toast. “To another seven years?”

 “To another seven years,” he clinked the glass of his bottle with mine. “And many more happy changes of pace, my love.”

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 The wonderful night ended with Barney and I making slow love in our bedroom back at the townhouse. I kissed him as if his oxygen breathed the meaning of life into me. He cradled me like during our first time, and many since then. Afterwards, we showered together, then exited the steam-filled bathroom wearing nothing on as we relaxed in our soft bed. I’d wrapped myself in the blanket and turned on the television as Barney went back to reading his next book, reading spectacles balanced on his nose. They were the same kind I often said made him look like a librarian. Something he considered a great compliment.

 I entwined my fingers with his and rested my head on his shoulder, watching the evening news. A she-wolf smiled while discussing with an otter the strides made by our military each day, a feel-good story about children supporting the troops, followed by a reminder about the Supreme Court’s upcoming cases, including Lawrence v. Texas. Nine individuals would decide whether somebody like me and Barney had the right to a private life.

 Nine people.

 Truth be told, the biggest reason I’d ever gone into behind-the-scenes politics, helping congressmen either lie or convince their constituents to vote for them, it didn’t revolve around morality. The dollar signs were what convinced me at first. The longer my relationship with Barney lasted, however, the clearer things became with where my beliefs lay. Hugging him close to me in bed, watching him read his novel and witnessing two pundits talk about ultimate judicial decisions that likely didn’t impact them, it caused me to consider what I wanted to do after the 2004 election.

 Most straight people didn’t consider us as being part of society. Much like my own employer, they liked scoffing at our existence without even thinking about how integrated we were in their daily lives. We were always seen, but never known unless exposed to their ridicule, and all that mattered was that we remained in the closet while catering to them. Otherwise, we needed to be put back inside.

 “Hey, Barney?”

 He used a finger to bookmark his page before closing the novel shut, “Yeah, Bri?”

 “What do you think of me becoming an activist?”

 The elder raccoon glanced between me and the television screen, where the news headline mentioned the SCOTUS case still being debated over. Once again, I assumed the worst, when seven years of being in love with him flatly proved my anxiety wrong.

 “I think that would be amazing of you, sweetie.”

 Smiling again, I leaned up to peck him on the lips, then rested my head again on his shoulder, looking back to the television. Reaching for the remote to turn it off, our raccoon tails rustled together under the blankets as I nestled closely to my partner, closing my eyes as he continued reading his book. Whatever the future held for us, whatever changed, whatever didn’t, I knew it would always be with Barney by my side.

 “Barney?” I whispered.

 “Yeah, Bri?” He murmured upon turning another page.

 “I love you.”

 I felt him kiss my forehead, then heard him place the book down and turn off the lights, feeling him pull me close to his warm chest. Our heartbeats and breathing became one.

 “I love you too. Happy anniversary, Brian.”