

Conversation between Young Men

by J.M. Whalen

The café door was pneumatic, and at first Scott didn't pull hard enough. Then he slipped through and walked to the bathroom, not returning the baristas' gaze.

The inside of the unisex bathroom was clawed-up with sharpie, and the wall behind the urinal squirmed with the exhortations and complaints of previous visitors. Scott squinted at the smudge of graphite between tiles: REPENT, SINNER.

He splashed some water on his face, scrubbed it with a paper towel, and leaned in toward the mirror. His eyes and cheeks were puffy with tiredness.

Something on his shirt caught the light, a scribbled complaint of his own: HELLO, MY NAME IS *Scott Malley*. It'd been on since the conference? A flight attendant's giggle returned to his mind, bereft of the sexual undertone he'd read into it at the time.

"*Fuck me,*" he muttered, crumpling the nametag and dropping it into the trash. He emerged from the bathroom and stood on the tiles uncertainly. An infant stared at him over its mother's shoulder, drooling onto a cloth, a dollop of curls elongating its head like a pear. Scott missed his kids.

Johnny jerked open the café door and entered. He squared his hips to the baristas, removed his sunglasses, and deflated Scott's lonely musings with a nod. Scott looked away and shifted on his feet like someone tolerating cold air. The two ordered coffee without greeting each other.

"I know what you came for, Scottie."

Scott looked up from lightening his double-shot, but Johnny was watching passers-by out the window.

"Yeah, I know."

"You're in Boston all the time on business, Scottie, I know you are. New Hampshire ain't that far away."

"Yeah."

"And you never call me up for coffee."

Johnny's south shore accent was like hot water on cold fingers, but his eyes kept pushing Scott's to the floor. Scott was sort of halfway stepping toward the doorway, but Johnny's body language made it clear that he wasn't going to follow until he'd said what he'd had to say. Scott turned back to face him.

"Sure, Johnny, I know. I ought to. I really should."

Johnny appraised him for a moment, until Scott looked down again, and then Johnny walked outside and held the door open, sipping his black decaf as he watched the cars go by. The pair walked to the Commons quietly. Scott picked at the paper sleeve around his cup, feeling Johnny's gaze pressing into him, then cleared his throat and projected his voice as best he could.

"Hey, just think about it, all right, Johnny? Promise me you'll think about it. I don't think I have to tell you how I feel. We did that before." He looked up, but Johnny had stooped for a leaf.

Johnny rose, looking away, and shook his head as he watched some kids playing on the lawn. It was stubborn early winter, when everyone was cold but went outside anyways, rubbing red fingers and shuffling feet.

"You're just gonna have to get Marcy or Katie to help you get your closure, Scottie. I'm out."

Scott followed his brother's eyes in time to see one of the kids trip and get left behind by the others. Her knees crashed hard against the frozen, lumpy ground, but she got up and ran on after the others, breathless.

"They barely knew him, Johnny."

"Well he barely knew any of us, Scottie, and he's hardly tried learnin' since. He just doesn't want to die a bad guy." His voice got softer at the end. "Accept it already, Scottie. Get someone else."

"Get someone else," Scott echoed.

Johnny crumpled the leaf in his hand, and the pair resumed walking. Scott wondered if it was just easier for Johnny to cast off someone he'd never forgiven than to let go of a person he'd one time loved; unexpectedly, the thought made things even worse for Scott. He felt like he'd eaten rocks. He cleared his phlegmy throat again and ran a rough hand through his hair.

"I... Listen, how's Heidi?"

"Doin' good. We're happy. Jackie's almost three, and everything's perfect now," Johnny said defiantly. Scottie wondered whom his brother still felt like he had to defy.

Scott's voice was getting quiet and strained, like his dad's had always been, like his own had used to be, before he'd started working on it. "Sounds like you really got things figured out." His neck and shoulders grew heavy with the anticipation of failure.

Johnny picked at the crumpled leaf as he replied: "You remember that time, Scottie, when—"

"—Just say it then, for real, so I can hear it for real," Scott interrupted quietly. He straightened his back and his shoulders, and the two finally looked at each other, eyes hard and clear, exhaling winter fog.

"Ok, Scottie. I don't want to see my no-good father. Ever again. Even though he's dying, and you're beggin' me to, as my brother. I just don't want to, Scottie. He left me and never came back, and now he sends you, instead of coming to say sorry himself, or else you just came here on your own. I have no idea. But I'm not gonna act like I forgive him, because I don't. I don't forgive him a second of it."

He took out his cell phone and sat down on a bench. Scott walked a short distance away. He dialed a number on his own phone, ran a rough hand through his hair, and waited for the familiar voice.

He cleared his throat again; "Yeah, Dad, I, I just wanted to talk a little bit, if you're free. I been hanging out with Johnny a little bit. Yeah, no, just since this mornin'. He's ok, Dad. Yeah. But hey, listen—"

"Hey, you don't have to say it. I know. I get it," interrupted his father, guardedly, voice throaty and strained. He'd told Scottie not to

come this morning. It was a reminder he just didn't need. "I'd a been the same in my time. It's a great big world out there, Scottie, and there just isn't enough days to do it all. Hey, listen, kid, speakin' a which, I gotta run."

"Listen, Dad, uh... I'll be by around five tomorrow mornin', yeah?"

"Yep. Weather looks fine, lots a clouds and just a speck a rain. We'll be catchin' 'em with our hands."

"Sounds perfect, Dad. Hey, what news on the tomato front?"

"Oh, goin' great."

Scottie kind of doubted it. He'd bought the tomato plants for his dad's most recent birthday, having read that it's good for guys that age to have a hobby to sink some time and affection into, but he could never really see that it would take.

"Hey, I gotta go, kid, it's a big wide world out there. The tomato plants a' callin' me."

They squeezed out a laugh. Scottie wasn't sure if pretending to be happy counted as being supportive or not. He felt like it did.

He wasn't ready for his dad to die like this: divorced once and widowed once; forgotten by two of his kids and shunned by another; sobered too god-damn late to impress anybody; lonely; regretful.

"Yeah, you really love those tomato plants, huh, Dad?"

"Ah, the tomato plants, Scottie. What I could tell you about a couple a tomato plants. They been callin' my name all my life, you just help me to hear it."

They laughed together again. A forced laugh and a tomato plant weren't nothing, Scottie felt suddenly, in his dad's voice; no, they weren't nothing.

"You got all my good bits, and all a ya mother's, too. Thank ya, Scottie."

"You got it, Dad."

