Qvember 2025

November is also Qvember, a month of posting fanworks related to Dept. Q. It's been a long time that I've participated in a fandom challenge. And I must say, I didn't realise how much I've missed this kind of thing.

What I've decided to do with it is a 100 word drabble challenge – a 100-word slice of life for a prompt each day. Does anyone even remember drabbles?

It feels a little bit like I'm cheating since 100 words barely feel like fic, but at least you'll get a small dose of Dept. Q every day that way from me this month, one chapter at a time. I hope you enjoy! If you'd like me to expand any of them into something that's more fleshed out, let me know!

01 – Hospital Stay

Carl doesn't remember.

He doesn't remember how he got to the hospital, that Jasper had been there to stay with him until he woke up from the surgery, that he'd almost died.

What he does remember is searing agony in his neck, an endotracheal tube down his throat, people touching him where it caused pain. He remembers not being able to speak or to swallow. He remembers lonely nights and nurses changing shifts.

He wishes he didn't *have* to remember but also knows this will always stay with him – like a stain permanently burned into the tapestry of his life.

02 – I Am Akram

"I am Akram."

That's what people are whispering behind Akram's back. Carl has heard it one too many times – colleagues making fun of how Akram used to introduce himself. These days he goes by DI Salim.

Just now another detective said it and Carl has heard it in the hallway in passing. "Oh yeah, 'I am Akram'. He's kinda creepy." Carl wanted to grab the young detective by the lapels and shake it out of her.

"Does it not bother you?" he'd asked Akram.

Akram had given him a sage and infuriatingly calm look. The answer had been simple.

“No.”

03 – Saviour Complex

“Ow!”

Carl flinches as Akram dabs disinfectant onto the cut on his eyebrow.

“Hold still,” Akram says, impatience swinging in his voice.

“How can I when you’re trying to corrode away my fucking eyebrow.”

Akram shoots him a look. “You are very squeamish.”

“And you have a fucking saviour complex.”

“If I had a saviour complex, the guy who hit you would be the one needing medical attention.”

“Then why am I the one who is sitting here, bleeding all over the fucking place?”

“Because you told me not to interfere.”

Carl has to admit, yes, that’s a fair point.

04 – Found Family

There’s a small, flat thing lying on the table in colourful gift wrap when Carl makes his way into the kitchen that morning.

Oh yeah. It’s his fucking birthday. His name is scrawled on the paper in Jasper’s barely legible handwriting. Carl curiously picks it up, opens it.

Two tickets, Hampden Park, UEFA playoffs – Scotland vs. England. Decent seats. Can’t have been cheap.

Something makes his brow constrict. He rubs his beard around his mouth. What he wants is to go into Jasper’s room and draw him into a hug.

For once, Carl wishes Jasper was actually skipping fucking school.

05 – Family Recipe

Carl puts the round tin on Akram’s desk, giving him a sort of smile. The kind that hides behind the beard but you can see when you look closely.

Carl proclaims, “Family recipe. Well, kind of.” There’s an undertone of bashfulness.

“Kind of?” Akram asks, unsure whether he should open the thing.

There are cookies in the tin, unshapely and burnt on the edges. “Might have left them in too long.”

Akram raises an eyebrow. “Since when do you bake?”

“Call it an experiment. Or blame Jasper. You choose.”

Akram tries one. It’s hard and dry. He eats it anyway.

06 – Fever

“Carl,” Rachel says in her best no-nonsense tone. “Get your arse into bed.”

“I’m fine,” he protests, immediately followed by a wet cough that leaves him panting.

“You are *not* fine. Bed. Now!”

He lifts both his hands defensively, then concedes.

Fifteen minutes later, she sits at the edge of his bed, feels him shivering beneath the duvet. She puts a comforting hand on his thigh. “I’ll stay. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Just avert my slow death,” he mutters.

She chuckles. “I didn’t think you were such a drama queen.”

He coughs again. “This sucks.”

“I know.”

07 – Close Call

Pop!

The gunshot goes off, the bullet whizzing past Hardy so closely that he can feel the whoosh of air next to his right ear. Instinctively, he throws his weight to the left, loses balance on his crutches, tumbles ungracefully to the ground. Broken glass shatters behind him.

He twists around, looks behind him, panic suddenly in his chest. Carl was behind him.

“Carl!” he calls out, trying to make out his partner.

The silence stretches on for endless seconds, until finally, he hears his voice. “I’m okay.”

Fuck. Another close call. Much too close. They can't keep doing this.

08 – Out Of The Blue

It started a week ago and it's becoming a problem.

It's always the right hand, and always out of the blue – a tremor out of nowhere Carl can't control. He's tried to hide it as best as he can, but now there's Akram sitting in the passenger seat, his voice always so gentle. He nods at Carl's hand.

"What are you going to do about that?"

Carl knows it's futile to deflect. "I don't fucking know."

"This is from stress. You should talk to someone."

He knows. But he can't. So he grunts and ignores it. Like he always does.

09 – Difficult Conversations

"Hardy," Carl laments. They don't talk about this. Because they don't need to. Except apparently Hardy does.

"No, I need you to hear this, mate. Actually, you probably need to hear this more than I need to say it."

Carl sighs. The bone deep kind out of the depths of what is left of his fucking soul.

Hardy meets Carl's eyes. "I don't blame you." Carl tries not to look away.

He can't. He looks away. "Yeah, well, I do."

"I know. Which is why I'm telling you this. This wasn't your fault."

But it is. It always will be.

10 – Stitches

"Jasper, how did this happen?" Carl asks as he eyes the three stitches in his stepson's brow.

Jasper shrugs. "This guy started throwing punches."

"Throwing punches? Just like that?"

"No. He was bullying this kid at school."

“And you got in the way?”

He shrugs again. “Yeah. Wasn’t right. Had to do something.”

Carl can’t help the small smile creeping onto his face. “Did you punch him first?”

Jasper shakes his head. “The guy was really mad. I didn’t punch him.”

Carl wants to hug him, tell him he did the right thing. Instead he just nods. “You want supper?”

11 – The Things We Don’t Say

“Carl.”

Akram’s voice is always steady. Like a rock in turbulent waters.

Carl grips the steering wheel of the parked car, his knuckles white. He’s on his way into the spiral.

“Tell me about Jasper.”

Carl inhales. Sharply. “Not now,” he snarls between clenched teeth.

“Yes, now. What is his favourite food?”

Carl’s jaw works, he tries to come up with an answer. “Burgers.”

“What else?”

“Maybe pizza,” he corrects.

“What kind?”

“I don’t fucking know!”

He is glaring at Akram now. His grip on the steering wheel has loosened and there is a faint, self-satisfied smile on Akram’s face.

12 – Flu/Head Cold

Carl isn’t sure what gives it away. Maybe it’s the wet cough or the way Jasper looks truly miserable, but this is a time when Carl actually condones that he stays home from school.

He remembers when he was a small boy and would come cuddling with them, wanted to sleep in their bed. Those days are long over.

He hesitates, then knocks on the door. Jasper is in his bed. “You ill?”

“Yeah. Think it’s the flu.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Nah.”

Carl leaves and puts on the kettle. The least he can do is make him some tea.

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“Seriously?” Moira says incredulously to the Syrian detective in front of her, holding up the speeding fine letter. “I would have expected this from Carl, but from *you?*”

“I did not see the speed camera,” Akram defends himself.

“How can you bloody miss them, they’re bright yellow and red!”

“I am very sorry, ma’am.”

Moira sighs, feeling another sneeze coming on. Her sinuses have felt like stuffed with wool the whole day and the headache isn’t fucking helping. Team Doolally will be the death of her one of these days.

“Get out of here,” she says, and Akram gladly complies.

13 – Sleep Deprived

Carl narrows his eyes. Did Akram just drop his head in a one-second nod of microsleep?

He looks more closely. Darker circles under his eyes, eyes not his usual sharp and attentive.

Carl isn’t the type to tell people how to live their lives. They’re all fucking grown-ups. And yet, here he is, standing by Akram’s desk. “How about you call it day, yeah?”

Akram’s eyes are on him, equal mix of denial, defiance and embarrassment. “There is still work to do.”

“And it’ll still be here tomorrow.”

Akram looks down, maybe ready to protest, but then he nods. “Okay.”

14 – I Didn’t Think You’d Come

Pain. Something searing in Carl’s lower left abdomen. Like maybe he got stabbed. He can’t fucking tell, can’t even double over onto the floor because his hands are tied to a metal pole behind him.

He shouldn't have gone out here alone. Akram had warned against it. Of course Carl hadn't listened.

He sucks in a sharp breath as he tries to move, his head swimming, his consciousness fading. Fuck.

And then there's Akram's voice.

"Carl."

Like a beacon. The fucking lighthouse on the shore. With his last ounce of strength, Carl lifts his head. "I didn't think you'd come."

15 – Bonding Over TTRPGs

Rachel smiles when she sees Carl on the couch, leafing through the D&D Player's Handbook.

"That's some unusual reading material."

He looks up at her. "Jasper wants to play. Thought I'd come prepared."

"Any idea what you're gonna play yet?"

"I don't know. Warlock?"

She laughs. "You wanna play a charisma-based character?"

"I don't even know what that means."

"It means you need high charisma."

"You think I can't pull that off?"

"You think quick on your feet and you're resourceful. You should look into Wizard."

He leafs to the right section. "Scholarly?"

"You're studying right now, are you not?"

16 – What If?

What if they'd never answered the Leith Park call?

Carl asks himself that question often. Too often, probably. He'd still be out with Hardy, solving murders like they used to. When Hardy didn't have impaired mobility, when life had seemed easier, less complex.

PC Anderson would still be alive, his daughter growing up with a loving family rather than a single mum. And Carl…

Carl would not be heading up Dept. Q, would not be solving cold cases in a grimy basement with his team of ragtag misfits he'd grown to appreciate. Would that really be better? He couldn't say.

17 – Team Building

"This is total bullshit," Carl grumbles.

"It is *not*," Rose cuts in.

"I have to answer 200 questions for a personality profile that says I'm a disagreeable prick who loathes the whole of society? I know that already. *You* know that already."

"No, Carl, this is about figuring out each other's strengths and weaknesses. You know, blind spots and all that."

"Yeah, my blind spot is not giving a fuck about people's personalities."

Hardy throws him a look from across the room. "And that is why we all love you."

"Shut up." Carl flips him off.

"Ta, love you, too."

18 – Minor Wounds

Rose has never seen it—until today. She heard Hardy mention it, that Carl is the most protective guy he knows.

He's pinned the perp to the wall, his lower arm across the guy's throat. "Get the fuck away from her!"

The small cut on her hand is barely bleeding.

When the perp is dealt with, Carl comes over to her. "You okay?"

"Aye. It's nothing."

He nods at her hand. "You should get that checked out."

She looks at him and wishes he would care about himself as much as he cares about the people he's grown to love.

19 – You Can't Park There!

"Carl, you can't park there!" Rose exclaims after Carl has stopped the car.

"Watch me."

"You know that Moira already has a pile of parking tickets on her desk from you, right?"

He flashes her a grin. "I do."

"You could lose your driving license."

He shrugs. "Nah. They're great leverage."

"Leverage?"

"Yeah. I'll start paying attention to parking regs when she starts actually making our basement habitable."

Rose shakes her head. "Jesus. And I called you a mentor…"

He shoots her a glance. "But I am. Basics of negotiation. Find whatever leverage you have and then use it wisely."

20 – Beach Day

"This is your idea of a beach day?" Carl says as they step out onto the small stretch of sandy beach.

Rachel gives him a look. "This is Scotland, not Mallorca."

He looks around. Cragged, grey-brown rocks overgrown with barnacles protrude from the pool of light teal water, framed by more rocks forking into the Atlantic ocean. Seaweed floats in patches of dark brown. To their left, corroded wooden spikes of a wrecked boat emerge amidst a stretch of lush, green grass.

He has to admit it's beautiful in its own right, and better than Mallorca by a long chalk.





21 – Forced Separation

She sees Carl standing by the living room window, hands shoved deep in his pockets, shoulders hunched, looking out onto the trees and greenery of Leith Links. He's stood there for a while.

Rachel slowly walks up to him, stands behind him and slides her hands gently between his arms and his torso. He tenses for a second, then relaxes. She leans her body against his.

"You miss him already, don't you?"

He lets out a cynical huff. "Fucking ironic, isn't it?"

"You knew the day would come when Jasper moves out."

"Yeah," he sighs heavily. "Still feels fucking wrong."

22 – May I Have This Dance?

"May I have this dance?" Miriam asks, holding her hand out to Carl.

He doesn't know what to say, wants to say, no, fuck off. This whole thing is ridiculous. The dark grey suit feels too tight around the shoulders, the tie too constricting around his neck. He hasn't worn a suit in years.

But this is Jasper's wedding, and he damn well had to make an effort. He hopes it won't end like his own marriage did, but Miriam seems genuinely caring and loveable – nothing at all like Vic.

"Fine," he concedes, hoping she'll forgive his terrible dancing skills.

23 – Bruised And Battered

“Jasper, what the fuck?”

Carl looks at his stepson who comes shuffling into the flat. His face sports a shiner, ugly reddish purple against pale skin.

And then Carl looks more closely, sees something else. Fear. He’s spooked. Carl is out of the chair before he even knows it, stands opposite Jasper, holds his upper arms. “What happened?”

Jasper doesn’t say anything, just kinda sags against Carl. Carl’s arms come around him, like it’s instinct. Jasper’s shaking. Fucking hell, what the fuck happened?

“Hey,” Carl says gently, pulling a little tighter. “I’m here. It’s okay.”

And Jasper just clings on.

24 – Get Away From Me!

Carl’s eyes are wide, panicked, his feet trying to find purchase on the dusty floor of the derelict building as he’s scrambling backwards against the wall. “Get away from me!”

Akram stands at a safe distance, unsure what to do. He thinks that they must have drugged Carl. He’s known to be unpredictable, but this is a new kind of unhinged he’s not seen before.

He looks sideways at Hardy, who meets his gaze, then throws caution to the wind. “Hey, mate. It’s me.”

Carl’s eyes roam nervously, but he doesn’t flinch quite as violently – like maybe it’ll be okay.

25 – Dislocation

Rose closes her eyes for a long moment as they stand outside the hospital, waiting for the taxi to arrive. She swallows, stares at the crack in the concrete in front of her feet.

“Hey,” Carl says gently, holding up his hand that has the index and middle finger in a splint. “I’m okay.”

“You screamed.”

“Yeah, because it fucking hurt.”

She closes her eyes again, tries not to relive the moment. “I’m not very good at this.”

“And that’s okay. Shit like this isn’t supposed to happen.”

“But it does. How do you do it?”

He shrugs. “I don’t.”

26 – Ghosts Of The Past

“Your aunt Enid, does she actually exist?” Rachel asks Carl as they sit at his kitchen table.

He frowns. “Yeah. When did I mention her?”

“You said Dr. Sonnenberg reminded you of her.”

“Huh. She does.”

“So who is she?”

Carl shrugs. “Grandmother’s sister. One of the few people who weren’t a total shitshow when I grew up.” He looks lost in thought. “Always had a hot chocolate and a hug for you.”

Rachel gets up, stands behind his chair and puts her hands on his shoulders. “I’ll always have a hug for you. And maybe also a hot chocolate.”

27 – Hobbies

Carl smiles every time he puts on the scarf. It’s a mix of red and burgundy, messy and imperfect with a few dropped stitches, but it’s soft and warm and a gift he’ll treasure with all his heart.

Hardy has given it to Carl on Boxing Day with a sly grin and the words, “You can thank the Dark Angel for this. It’s done absolute wonders for my hand coordination.”

Carl made a show of finding it hideous, but he still wears it every fucking day, thankful that his partner clawed his way back and emerged on the other side.

28 – Pain Meds

Carl looks at Jasper as the latter wordlessly puts a medication bottle on the table in front of Carl. “I’m not taking that.”

Jasper shoots him a no-nonsense look. “You’ve shattered your fucking wrist.”

He has. And it does fucking hurt. Carl pushes the opioids a few inches away. “I said I’m not fucking taking that.”

“Why?”

His brow furrows with the grim memories. “I know what that shit does to people.”

“I mean, it’s not like you immediately get addicted when you take it for a week.”

No. But he made a promise once. He’s gonna fucking keep it.

29 – Don’t Give Me That Look

Carl isn’t the type to hold grudges. Which is why this stings more than it should.

He hasn’t so much as looked at James since he found out that he is helping with the Leith Park case, only says the bare minimum they have to work together.

Everyone’s left except the two of them, and Carl shoots him that look. That one that says *fucking traitor*.

“Come on, mate,” James tries. “I couldn’t tell you.”

Carl snarls, “Don’t.”

James stays quiet, because what can he say? “For what it’s worth, I hated not telling you.”

“Yeah. I don’t fucking care.”

30 – Not A Single Word Spoken

Carl had expected anger. He wasn’t prepared for the silence.

A week ago he got a phone call from Vic’s mother than Vic had been killed on the spot in a freak car accident.

Jasper took the news with a stoic expression, like a page out of Carl’s fucking book. It’s been one-sentence answers and avoidance since.

He raps on Jasper’s door before he enters. He sees Jasper sitting on the floor, his back against his bed, forehead on his knees. Without question, Carl sits down next to him and pulls his arm around his shoulder to draw him closer.

(Is it too cruel to kill Vic? I dunno. Maybe. We can pretend this is AU, ok?)

Advent Calendar

01 – Hot Toddy

“Here,” Akram holds the steaming mug out to Carl. Somehow they ended up in his flat because it was just around the corner and Akram insisted that Carl couldn’t go home in dripping wet clothes in 2 °C weather.

Carl sniffs, then takes a sip. It’s surprisingly potent. “I thought you didn’t drink.”

Akram gives him one of those looks, the one that makes Carl wonder who this person really is. “I don’t,” he says simply.

“So you keep a bottle of whisky around just for the sake of it?”

Akram smiles. “It was a gift I could not refuse.”

02 – Walk In The Snow

“Why the fuck are we doing this again?” Carl asks exasperatedly, patting the snow off of his leg from where he just slipped on the icy path.

Jasper turns to face him. “You said something about the view…”

Carl turns around, takes in the view of the snow-powdered city below them from where they stand near the top of Arthur’s Seat. “The view can go fuck itself,” he grumbles but secretly has to admit it does look beautiful.

Jasper sidles up to him. “Weren’t you the one who suggested this?”

Carl sighs. “Remind me to not to do that again.”

03 – Woollen Beanie

“What the *fuck* are you wearing?!”

Rose passes Carl’s desk, not sure what he’s getting at. Carl points at her hat that she pulls off her curly hair. “Oh, that.”

It’s a purple woollen hat with cat ears. Rose off-handedly mentions, “Nova knitted it for me.”

“Who the fuck is Nova?”

“DC Wilson.”

“She’s called *Nova*?”

“Yes. How do you not know that, Mr. I-Have-A-Thing-For-Names?”

“How do *you* know about that?”

Rose shoots him a *srsly?* look. “From Nova.”

“From *DC Wilson*?”

“Yes. Carl.” She shoots Hardy a pointed look. “Is he the last to know?”

Hardy shrugs. “I guess.”

04 – Delayed

There’s a hint of smile playing at Carl’s lips as he waits at Waverly station. Rachel has been visiting a friend in Banff for a week who was going through a rough time.

His smile falters as he sees her walking towards him, her face all grim. She hasn’t even reached him yet when the frustration readily spills out. “Sorry I’m so late, but I missed the fucking connection in Aberdeen and it turned into a real nightmare.”

He closes the gap between them, takes her by the waist and plants a kiss on her lips. “Hello to you, too.”

05 – Office Row

“Can we forget this ever happened?”

Carl stares at Logan. They’re in a bathroom stall, the annual Christmas party in full swing a few rooms away. Carl can still feel Logan’s hands all over him, his taste in his mouth.

Logan’s eyes flick away. He’s angry. “Really? You come onto me like a horny bat, and now you wanna forget about it?”

“I, uh… I think I had few too many.”

Logan shakes his head. “You’re a cruel fucking prick, you know that?”

Carl stares at the door to the bathroom stall that closes behind Logan. “So I’ve been told.”

Author's Note: Just to say that I don't actually ship them. Nor do I even really want to entertain the idea that this could be a reality, but it was brought up as a joke in a group chat, and so I had to write it. :-D

06 – Christmas Bauble

This morning when Carl gets down to the basement, there's an unfamiliar smell mingling with the faint mildew and rust. Is that… pine?

He sees it as he walks closer – and honest to fucking God – it's a Christmas tree that Rose and Akram are flanking and decorating with blue baubles. Carl points at it. "What the fuck is this?"

Rose looks at him. "Oh, come on now, Carl. We'll have to have some festive cheer in here."

"Festive cheer my fucking arse." He looks at Akram. "And why are *you* helping her?"

He shrugs. "I like the festive cheer, too."

07 – Secret Santa

It's funny, Carl thinks, that everyone assumes he hates Secret Santas. Which actually he doesn't. Not when it's people he likes.

What he hates is the fake gift giving out of tradition or obligation. But if he can put his detective skills to the task and listen to what people are actually saying, if he can put the puzzle pieces together to pick a little thing for someone, and then see them light up when they unwrap it, what's not to like?

The genuine smile on Rose's face while examining the carefully chosen wooden pen tray is definitely worth it.

08 – Hopeful

It's such a small thing, and someone else might not have thought anything of it, but it feels momentous to Jasper.

As they were doing the washing up, Carl had dried his hands on the tea towel and put a hand on Jasper's shoulder as he said, "Don't forget to take out the rubbish, yeah?"

Carl has never been the touchy-feely type, but they were a lot closer when Jasper was younger. Carl hasn't touched him in a long time, and it gives Jasper hope that Carl might finally be getting the upper hand in the battle with his demons.

09 – New mug

Carl isn't sure whether he feels very Christmassy this year. Rain is pelting against the living room window, their Christmas tree that Jasper insisted on is crooked and only sparsely decorated, but he's here, on the couch with Jasper on Christmas Day morning, unwrapping their gifts.

This one is an eggshell white mug with the letters *Worst Dad Ever* in an 80's retro style font on it. Carl throws Jasper a pointed look. Jasper has a grin on his face that's part smug, part sheepish.

Yep, Carl thinks and smiles. This will do nicely down in the basement at work.

10 – Candle

Carl gets it a few days before Christmas as Rose hands him the physical mail from the day, not that they get a lot of physical mail anymore.

It's a simple envelope. Thick, high quality paper, the address written in neat handwriting. His name is on it.

It's a Christmas card with a drawing of festive greenery and a candle. Carl thinks the style looks familiar. On the inside, it says, *'William drew this for you. Thank you for all you did.'*

He hasn't thought about them for a long time but now he has a lump in his throat.

11 – Favourite Places

Follow-up to the Day 14 drabble I wrote for Qvember

"You hate this, don't you?" Carl asks, his voice quiet, grimacing as the simple shift of body weight in his hospital bed aggravates the stab wound in his lower abdomen.

It prompts Jasper to look at him. "Yeah. But you probably hate it even more."

Carl can't hide the cynical smile. "No, I really love this. Can't imagine wanting to be anywhere else."

"Carl…"

"Sorry. It's just…"

"Yeah," Jasper sighs.

"If all goes well, I'll be out of here in a few days."

"That's good."

Carl closes his eyes. They're dancing on eggshells again, and Carl hates that even more.

12 – Guilt

"Merry Christmas, mate," Carl says as he puts the gift-wrapped box on Hardy's hospital nightstand.

Hardy turns his head in silent acknowledgement.

Carl has got the silent treatment a lot lately – blank stares devoid of drive or interest. Carl hates it, but he gets it, he really does. Hardy's lying here, unable to do much except read and watch TV. How could that not drag you down into a black hole?

But Carl also can't give up on Hardy, refuses to give up. So he sits down in the chair and helps fill the mint green space with more silence.

13 – Closure

Closure is fucking overrated, Carl thinks.

He stares at the face pinned to the file in front of him. The eyes don't even look familiar, and he's seen them behind the ski mask so many times.

He's trying to figure out what to do with this news, that they found the shooter. He feels… nothing. Because at the end of the day, it doesn't fucking matter. Hardy is still struggling with mobility, Anderson is still dead, their lives still all turned fucking upside down.

This doesn't change a damn thing. What a fucking letdown of a Christmas present this is.

14 – Home

Rachel hears that Carl is exhausted before she's even laid eyes on him. The way the keys carelessly clank onto the kitchen table, the way he releases a weary sigh like he's finally allowed to let some of the weight slide off his shoulders.

She meets him as he tiredly sinks down into one of the chairs.

Her hands find his shoulders, start massaging and probing gently. His muscles are all knotted and tense, but he sighs nonetheless, but this time it's release more than exhaustion.

She leans down to plant a soft kiss on his head. "Glad you're home."

15 – Wish List

“Jasper, you’re not getting a fucking iPhone.”

The teenager predictably protests, “But everyone has one!”

“Yeah, so maybe you should get off your lazy arse every once in a while and get a paid job so you can afford to buy one for yourself.”

“How would I have time for a job next to school?”

Carl shrugs. “I don’t know. *I* managed to do it.”

“You had a job when you were in school?”

“Yeah. No. It was… complicated.”

Jasper suddenly seems a lot more interested in this conversation. “I wanna hear that story.”

Carl sighs. “I’m sure you do.”

16 – Broken Plumbing

Carl flexes his right hand. It’s too shaky, like it always is when he’s had another panic attack. He hates the way it takes control, the way it stays with him the whole day, the way it hits out of the blue.

He meets with Rachel in the café later that day. His hands wrapped around a coffee mug, he says, “I need your help.”

He half expects her to come back with a sarcastic retort, like *Mark the day when Carl Morck actually asks for help.* But she just says, “Of course. If I can.”

“I need a plumber.”

17 – Warm Hands

“Carl. Not everything is your fault.”

Moira’s voice is low. Like she means it. Like she cares. She takes a step closer.

Carl shakes his head. “It’s my team. My responsibility.”

“People make their own decisions. You can’t be responsible for everything. You’re just one person. Besides, it’s a mild concussion. They will just keep him overnight.”

He sighs. That's bad enough. It shouldn't have happened.

He feels a soft, warm touch of a hand on his shoulder. "You can't always carry the weight of the whole world." Moira's fingers give him a gentle squeeze. "Why don't you go home?"

18 – Longing

Rachel's gentle fingers dab the cut on Carl's forehead, and he doesn't know what to do with it. Her touch is soft and warm and it's funny you tend to forget certain things in the absence of them.

She stops and looks him in the eyes. "Carl?"

He takes her hand in his, slowly brings her palm to his lips and kisses it.

She smiles then gently withdraws her hand. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, shall we?"

He sighs, wondering if he'll have someone in his life again who will want him as he is—baggage and all.

19 – Warm Bath

"Carl," Rachel says.

He's sitting at her kitchen table, shoulders hunched, knuckles tiredly rubbing his eyes.

She places one hand on his shoulder. "When's the last time you had a decent night's sleep?"

He shrugs, his voice tired. "I don't even know."

"What you need is a warm bath and a bed, not this." She takes the still half-full coffee mug off of him and puts it on the counter.

"I wish I had time for that."

"That's horseshit. You can make the time. It's not selfishness to cater to basic needs. It's self-care."

He sighs. "Okay. If you insist."

20 – Ghosts

Carl can feel the buzz of the liquor now. The first two shots still tasted nice. It was the expensive stuff that Victoria used to keep around. Añejo – all warm, golden colour with notes of caramel and whisky. He stopped tasting the subtleties after the third or fourth shot.

“Carl?” Jasper appears in the doorway.

“Cheers.” Carl holds up another shot glass and downs it in one swift motion.

“What the hell is this?” Jasper’s voice is laced with that sharp undertone of equal parts worry and accusation.

He hopes his voice isn’t slurring. “Happy fucking wedding anniversary to me.”

21 – Lonely

Carl doesn’t usually mind working on Christmas. It’s quiet, less distractions, less human interactions.

Except this year it’s different. The basement is better when there’s people here, when he can’t hear the clunking noises inside the pipes or the tapping of the radiators. When there’s quiet chatter or silence that fills the air with the kind of comfort that you only notice when it’s absent.

He jumps when he hears the door of the elevator opening. Rose walks in, deposits mince pies on his desk. “Merry Christmas, Carl.”

He hates mince pies, but he smiles and nods at her anyway.

22 – Christmas Tree

“Carl?” Jasper asks. “Are we gonna get a tree this year?”

Carl frowns. “Huh? What for?”

“I dunno. Christmas cheer?”

“When have you ever known me to care about fucking cheer?”

A small grin flits across Jasper’s face. “Tradition, then.”

“Since when you do *you* care about those things?”

Jasper shrugs. “Just think it’d be nice.”

“Nice…” he echoes dismissively, and leaves it at that.

Two days later, there’s a decorated tree in the corner of the living room, and Carl has to admit he doesn’t hate it as much as he thought. He doesn’t actually hate it at all.

23 – Isolation

The pandemic massively sucks – not just the social distancing. Carl and Hardy have been reassigned to help with enforcing rules, with domestic disputes, with menial things he hasn't dealt with for decades. And then there's the mask rash that makes it all a million times worse.

Of course Carl catches the actual virus two days before Christmas. Just his fucking luck. They quarantine him in Jasper's room, food provided at regular intervals, the occasional conversation through the door while he feels like fucking shit.

He's never been much of a fan of the holidays, but this one trumps them all.

24 – Snow Falling

"Look," Jasper says as he puts his Christmas dinner plate in the sink.

Carl and Rachel look out the window where big, white snowflakes are falling.

"Fuck me," Carl says. "Don't even remember the last time it snowed for Christmas."

Rachel gets up. "Let's go outside."

"Now?" Carl asks.

"Yes, now."

Ten minutes later, the three of them stand in winter clothes at the edge of Leith Links, watching the grass as it gets increasingly covered in a blanket of powdery snow.

Carl takes Rachel's gloved hand and slings one arm around Jasper's shoulder. "Who'd have thought. **Merry fucking Christmas.**"