

BLANK SPACES

"Hey. You coming to the show tonight?" I shudder as I hear it. I do not want to see this show. That whole band is a bunch of posers. They think the masks they wear make them true arteests (sic). Give me a break. Braindead Halloween outfits can't make up for lackluster and uninspired music. "Yeah, I'll be there." Damn, I hate myself so much sometimes. "Starts at Eight." Yeah. Yeah. I cannot wait.

The apartment smelled funny when I got home. I guess the heat had kicked on for the first time this season. It always has that burning hair smell for a couple of days. I turned on the ceiling fans and went to throw some mac and cheese on the stove. I really did not want to go to that show tonight. Jonathan wasn't going to shut up about it though. If I didn't go, I'd never hear the end of it. I put the water in a pot and put it on high heat. It was going to be a few minutes. Above the stove, there were two small holes. I'd been living here for about 3 years, and I'd noticed them before, but this time I really thought about them. I'd always just thought they were holes from where the prior tenant had hung up a spice rack. Looking at them now though, they looked a little too wide. Oh well, I have no clue why the people who used to live here did anything they did.

After I had moved in, I found a notebook in one of the closets. It had a bunch of rambling stuff in it, some poetry, some horrible looking drawings. You know, the normal accoutrement for a shut in. I'm pretty sure the woman who lived here before had not left the apartment in quite a while. There was also _____ in the notebook. Every night when I go to sleep I still think about that. It haunts me like a bad Taco Bell burrito, if you know what I mean. I survived all those shaky meals, I'll survive _____ as well. Sometimes I look into _____, and I swear I can see it staring back. It's waiting there. It's watching.

The show was actually packed when I got there. There were a lot more people than I was expecting. The speakers were blaring the usual indie hits that play before all of these concerts now. A layer of blue cascaded onto the room from the lights above. It was a curtain onto the concert goers, a lavish dressing on top of an eager cuisine. I saw a girl I knew, Jenny, across the floor. She waved casually at me, not one of those waves that says "Come over here", just one of those that says "I see you there." "When did you get here?" Jonathan sidles up beside me. "You know I had to come, otherwise you'd never let me forget it." He smiled with acknowledgement that what I said was absolutely true. As the music coming from the speakers faded out, I saw the masked musicians walk onto the stage. Look, I'm not trying to offend anybody, but I always found that bands that wear masks or makeup were always trying to make up for a lack of musical ability. It's a gimmick. That's all it is. Remember when KISS took off their makeup? Yeah, they became just another generic hair metal band. I didn't know any of these guys personally. I don't even know what they actually look like. I guess that's one of the perks of wearing a mask. The audience can project themselves into that void. Don't look too long though, or you'll soon realize there's nothing there, not even you.

As the lights raised on the room, I came to terms that I thought the music was pretty good, not that I'd ever admit that to anyone. My eyes immediately moved to the corner of the room I was fascinated with earlier. Jenny's got the type of vibe I can't describe. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Yet completely original in every way. She's not the kind of girl that wears a mask. Even the vertical scar on her cheek tells a story. Her eyes are black holes I would gladly jump into just in time to be ripped to shreds. I'd be reborn as I crossed their event horizons. She wasn't where she was anymore though. I left without getting to say hello.

_____ taught me more about myself than anything else. It dominated my every high and comforted me at my every low. The cursor on the computer screen blinks back with a sigh from the universe, a million lives come and gone and here I am for this moment. Out the office window, I see the world come and go. Jenny texted me after the concert and told me we should get together soon. She said it had been too long and life was too short, even paths that diverge can unify again. If only it was that easy. The mind may move on, but the heart never forgets. Not my heart anyway.

Last night I peered into those holes again. Even with a flashlight, I couldn't really make out a wall behind it. All I saw was the light reflecting back. I sat there on the kitchen floor for a while just thinking. I remember when I was a kid, I used to lie on my bed and look up at the ceiling and just daydream about what could have been and what could be. In that darkness of my mind, I created stories about who I would grow up to be or how things would have changed if only I had said the right things. In our modern world, most of that quiet time is now occupied with social media. People don't live in their head anymore, the outside world does. I picked up the flashlight, threw it in the junk drawer and went to bed.

The blackness stretched into infinity and my ego dissipated into a forest of deep noise. Creeping death. Blind spots. Blank spaces. It's the places we hide the things we don't want the world to see. It's the _____. A set of eyes danced like holes blasted into a sheet of college-ruled paper by a meticulous 3-hole punch. Gliding. BAM. BAM. BAM. "Where you at _____. You still around? You still hoping to gain a peek under the hood? FAT FUCKING CHANCE!" The pupils floated in the pond of blue in an ocean of white in a universe of black. Beautiful in its own catharsis. I woke up gasping for air. I barely made it back.

The world was covered in film grain as I logged onto my work computer. Everything was clear but there was inherent fuzziness to it. The sounds and bustle of people shuffling in spilled into my ears over the clanking of coffee cups. The moment went from a black screen to something fully realized faster than I could mentally take note. I've been listening to that band from the other night a lot the past couple of days. There was something strange yet overwhelmingly familiar about their songs, like I had heard them a million times yet also never at all. The songs stacked in layers and if you listened close enough, you could pick apart single parts that could stand all on their own, yet also blended in seamlessly to the overall piece. That's how the world is. A single person drowns in the sounds of society, yet without them, something would certainly be missing. At least that's what I tell myself. The world would never notice if I suddenly dropped off the Earth.

I remember when I told Jenny about _____. I can only describe her reaction as puzzled. She didn't really know what to say. I immediately regretted telling her about it. Looking at her, directly into her eyes, I had seen that look before. I had seen those eyes before. After a few minutes, Jenny spoke. "Well, I don't really know what to say. I've never had anyone tell me anything like this before. I've known you a long time, but I just know nothing is ever going to be the same now. I'll never be able to look at you the same way. You know my past. You know what I've been through. You know those skeletons I hide, and this just brings them all to the surface. I'm sorry, but I just don't think I can see you anymore. I always loved talking to you, but this is just something I can't deal with. I'm sorry." Jenny got up and grabbed her things. As she opened my apartment door, she looked back at me one last time. Her eyes were pale from the effects of knowing. She looked back for longer than I thought she would have, and then she walked through the doorway and out of my life forever.

I sat there on the sofa for a couple of hours after Jenny left. Why I told her what I did, I'll never know. There are some things that should always stay hidden, even from the people you care about the most. There's no way to anticipate how much it might affect them. I was sad and depressed, so I went to grab a beer from the kitchen. I knew that would make me feel better. It had to, right? It would make all these feelings go away. As I pulled the beer from the fridge and set it on top of the counter in order to pop the top, my eyes focused on the holes above the stove again. I stuck my index finger in the hole on the right. I shoved it as far back as possible, but felt nothing but the sides of the hole. I stepped over to the junk drawer and grabbed a pen. I shoved the pen through the hole until the edge barely stuck out. The pen was still hitting nothing. I used my finger to push the pen further inside until I could push it no more. I could still feel the end of the pen, yet it still didn't seem to be hitting anything. _____ invaded my mind like a 2000s black friday stampede. Plastic ripping. Paper flying. People screaming. Flash. Flash. Flash. Flash. "Associate needed on aisle 7." "Maintenance, cleanup on aisle 5." The roar of consumerism collapses into a cold, black void. A black dot on the graph of capitalism. The whole scene is a microcosm of far larger decay. I snapped back to reality and shoved the pen as far as I could, yet I never heard a drop.

I grabbed my beer and headed back into the living room. I couldn't be worried about that shit right now. Jenny was gone for good, and it hadn't even hit me yet. Even though it had only happened a couple of hours ago, I knew I'd never see her again. In my mind, I was already constructing fantasies of us running into each other at a bookstore and making amends, making it all okay again. Deep down, I knew it wasn't ever going to happen. Deep down, I knew our paths would never cross again. I put in my earbuds and laid back on the sofa. That band from the other night had finally got their music up on a streaming service. I wasn't having to rely on YouTube videos anymore with subpar sound quality. Of course you know I'm an audiophile. I'm such a fucking hipster I know. "It's time to let her go. The hole she filled you'll always know. She stabbed my heart with a serrated blade. My soul's left jagged from the mess she made." The sound and lyrics ripple out into my ears and wrap around my mind. Those Halloween mask wearing frauds sure have a way with words, especially at times like these when my whole life

seems like it's falling apart. For once, I'm glad I have to work overtime this week. I hope it will help me distance myself from _____. I hope it keeps me from thinking about Jenny.

As I sat down in my cubicle, I breathed a sigh of relief. Yesterday was a day I knew would define me as a person. It had already ripped me wide open and left a gaping hole. I still couldn't stop bleeding from the wound. Mental scars go deep, and there's nothing physical that can repair them. Avoidance is my only path even if it means shoving part of myself in a closet and throwing away the key. It's only 8:01, and I've already felt the sting of a thousand swords in my mind. It will be a long day. I got up and walked into the break room. Two cups of black coffee were sitting on the counter. They looked like no one had even taken a drink from them. It was as if they were poured and then the people disappeared into the ether, never to be seen from again. The surface of the contents of the left coffee cup reminds me of Boötes Void, a mystery in the middle of the sea of stars. The right cup's contents reminds me of the black death. They were two black ponds reflecting the fluorescent lighting. The hum reminds me of the low rumble before a nuclear blast, a quiet buzz before total collapse. I grabbed a day old donut and headed back to my desk.

The rest of the day went as usual. I watched dust motes float in the air for most of it. I couldn't bring myself to do anything meaningful. I pretended to be working when my manager walked by. I was actually doom scrolling through social media. Some guy named "twinAbyss" had requested me as a friend. I dismissed the notification and continued my descent into oblivion. No clue who half of these people are anyway. There was a company cookout for lunch. The burgers were so burned and black that they might as well have been hockey pucks. You know I ate them though. I wouldn't dare turn down a free lunch. I'm not just a hipster. I'm a fatass cheapskate hipster. I left work an hour early because I had some stuff I needed to get from the hardware store.

AI spilled its guts out onto a retail screen as I asked it to point me in the direction of the hammer section of the store. Technology. Technology. Technology. I used to hate when I was bothered by employees asking me if I needed any help while I was shopping. It's funny how you never know what you've got till it's gone. We all glamorize our younger years. We all linger on _____. The great human experiment stumbles and tumbles on. Where it stops, somebody knows. There were no cashiers when I got to the front to checkout, so I had to do it myself. There was somebody watching me, of course: watching me scan my items, watching me bag my items, watching me make my payment, and asking to see my receipt as I left. Yes, this is so much better than the old days when I could put my purchases up on a belt and let the cashier get paid to scan them. Sometimes I wonder if there's any hope for the future. Sometimes I wonder if there ever was.

It was dark by the time I was walking up the stairs to my apartment. Miss Clara, my neighbor, was outside sitting in a lawn chair by her door. She seemed like she had just been staring out into the parking lot and over Walker Ridge. As she saw me, she turned and looked at the bags I was carrying up the steps. "You doing some renovations?" She asked with a smile. The pops and buzzes of insects hitting the light above us punctured through the sound of the wind coming

through the complex. The world's always playing a little tune even if no one bothers to listen. I turned to look up at the sky. Even when it's solid blue, we all know it's deep black. It's a plot hole in the fabric of reality. It's a long dark tunnel on an overcast day. If I thought too much about what might be out there, I'd be terrified. It's just another fear I push deep down into the depths of my subconscious. "Yeah, I guess you could say that." I finally said after what seemed like far too long. Miss Clara kept looking at me, still smiling. She could tell something was bothering me, but she knew I wouldn't tell her. _____ was something she wouldn't ever understand. Nobody understands. She just stared into my eyes for a long time without saying anything. I think it was only a few seconds, but it seemed like forever to me. Like Planck time, it barely registered but it felt like it hung there for eternity. Her words suddenly cut through the silence like a maid dropping folded towels onto an established stack. It was comforting like a mother's voice to her newborn child, yet sad in the knowing that all finite systems inevitably decay. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. "Well, you just be careful in there. Sometimes, you don't know what you'll find." Her smile never wavered, and her eyes never left my own. I faked a smile. "I will be."

After getting inside my apartment, I threw my keys on the kitchen counter and dropped shopping bags by the stove. I grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and twisted off the top. I leaned back on the counter and looked at the old family pictures I had on my fridge. Most were held up by chip clips. Curiously, none of my many opened bags of potato chips had anything clamping them shut. I'm sure most were stale from the outside world making its way in, turning it into something different than what it was meant to be. The beer was cold. It tasted the same as it always did. The bubbles clung to the side of the bottle, each desperately trying to make their way to the top. The pops and gurgles of my insides echoed the bubbles letting go. Like dark swamps in a Louisiana summer, they danced. I finished the bottle and threw it in the trash. I grabbed another. As I swallowed, I looked at the holes in the wall above the stove. I thought about Jenny, as much as I didn't want to. I thought about her eyes the last time I saw her, the last time I'd probably ever see her. I knew she'd haunt me forever though, the same way her scar haunted her anytime she looked into a mirror. I took another drink. I saw on social media earlier that the masked band got signed to a label. Good for them. I just hope they don't let the guys on top shave off all their rough edges. Most of us are never that lucky, we have to conform to the mold. I took the last drink of the bottle and smashed it onto the kitchen floor. Bits of glass went flying across the room. The remains laid there like the remains of a cratered economy, lifeless before the agency of rebuilding. I reached down and retrieved the contents of the shopping bag. I took a sledgehammer to the wall above the stove in a final act of useless defiance. _____ is always on my mind.