

The University

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During the next apocalypse, the classroom walls will disappear.

It is likely to happen while you are lecturing on Barthelme's 'The School' and holding students in an elongated pause, waiting for them to respond to the classroom intrusion at the end of the story. They'll speak about Barthelme's absurdist philosophies, about the cycles of life and death, about the mimetic representation of real-life giant gerbils that barge in through classroom doors until you point out there is no actual disruption in the story, certainly not from a gerbil or anything giant. The door opening at the end of the story is simply a return to the way things were in the beginning. This will become relevant later.

Somewhere near the end of class, just as the first student begins rustling the zipper on their backpack to stow away their notebook, the walls will vanish without wind or warning. One moment, they will be solid and consistent in the ambient hum of modern air conditioning, mildew growing slowly over the wave-like textures in the corners. The next moment, they will not be.

You will hype up the reading for the next class when you plan to discuss Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif', the disappearance of the walls barely registering as a skip between the iambs of your lecture, but the students will not notice. They will carry on as though nothing has changed in their world. A few will scratch the last bit of lead from their pencils between the lines in their notebooks during frantic attempts to record the last three points you've made. Most will gaze at the whiteboard with the same blank and zoned-out eyes they always have by the end of every lecture.

After the students file out the room, bumping and colliding with one another through the still-present doorframe next to the whiteboard, Dr Yates will be in the classroom next to yours packing away papers into his briefcase, glistening with the sweat of an older man perpetually frustrated by the microcosmic remnants of human responsibility, likely pondering the major philosophical concerns that brought him to academia in the first place and cursing the teaching responsibilities that came with the territory. For him, the world is a fragmented picture puzzle, he the puzzlemaster he'd imagined himself as a child, and his students the shrill shrieks of his

mother begging him to take out the garbage instead of piecing together a photographic replica of the *Mona Lisa*.

Somehow, the translucency of the walls will still carry a rigidity of purpose, holding up the metal-framed structure of the building, so you'll walk out your doorway, through the hall, and into Yates' classroom. He'll ask why you didn't knock, so you'll exit and motion as though you are banging on the transparent door.

Yates will hear through the silence of the knock and invite you in, playing his role in the apocalyptic circumstances which will have transpired.

What do you make of all this? you'll ask.

Of what?

The walls disappeared.

Oh, I suppose that happened.

You'll most likely decide to continue on with the rest of your day and not immediately drive home for a cold beer and a shower so hot the steam threatens to peel against the edges of your face, so you'll walk to your office and wonder if the walls will change back, how you'll change your pedagogical strategies if they do not, if you even want the world to return to normal. After all, every apocalypse has temporary parts and permanent parts, and sometimes what seems permanent only lasts a little while. But every apocalypse has some great resulting impact that never goes away. Like shadows burned onto Hiroshima sidewalks or scarred lungs from Agent Orange. An added flinch whenever the painted nail of your mother's index finger digs into your collarbone and she calls you by your dead name. Or that perpetual coal fire in Centralia.

As you pass through the hallways, you'll notice the disappearing walls have the effect of exposing disastrous attempts at upkeep in your colleagues' offices. Discarded muffin sleeves beginning to mold where someone had missed the throw into the trash can. Brown coffee stains crisscrossed on the gray carpet between the grad student cubicles. Literal piles of paperwork burying the department chair under her desk.

And Dr Heaney will not have recognized the problem, at least you won't think he has. His eyes will refuse to leave his computer screen, and he'll sip the same tea — Earl Grey with

two packets of artificial sweetener — leftover from that morning. He's never been known for his fervent attention to the outside world, perhaps a lesson learned from watching two tenured professors in powdered wigs duel with lead-balled pistols before the most recent changes in university by-laws, but you hope, for the sake of his students, he will take a moment to gauge how the apocalypse might impact his teaching.

The cigarette butt smoldering on Heaney's desk will tickle your nose hairs in a synaptic response bringing you back to your grandmother's living room and the brown ashtray overflowing with cigarettes on a side table, and the sudden urge to clean your workspace will pierce through your spine as you become very conscious of any judgments that might be levied at you through the pellucid row of offices. You'll want a tidy glass house if you're to begin throwing stones of your own. Besides, you wouldn't want your students to view you as anything other than a peerless defender of spartan lifestyles. They should never see you as a human being who, two years before top surgery, was vulnerable enough and drunk enough after four shots of bottom-shelf tequila to let a cute boy in a leather jacket slide his fingers down the crack of your ass and hover the middle one over a sensitive spot, only for one of his friends to walk into the closet and flash a picture of your orgasming face when the cute boy slips his middle finger in. And you certainly won't want them to recognize the residue of your trailer park childhood lingering on the tip of your tongue, the same residue that periodically manifests in your speech patterns as you pass from high to low diction like at the department holiday party when you told the story about the cute boy to the department chair after a couple shots of higher shelf tequila that time. It would violate the syllabus to let them know that you, too, contain even the slightest degree of humanity.

Even if the walls have disappeared.

After having lectured and cleaned your office, the interior of your eyes will vibrate with a stale resonance, warranting a walk around the building. You'll tighten the laces on your high-heeled boots because there is a distinct possibility they'll have loosened during the ambling route back to your office and you'll take a lap around the fourth floor.

In the conference room, Dr Newstrom will be hunched over the table, working to sand away her initials, which will have been carved alongside Dr Stevenson's inside a crude drawing of a heart during a brief affair at the tail end of Stevenson's marriage. The sheet of sandpaper

will have worn thin, the grit losing ground to the impossibly hard lacquer of the table, and you'll remember the time that time behind the copy machine, Newstrom's tongue so far down Stevenson's throat, you thought you might have to perform the Heimlich. You had no desire to allow the scene to be cultivated as memory — straight sex makes you gassy — but you needed copies of a story for your students, so you ran Raymond Carver's 'Cathedral' through the copier while they continued on with their make-out session. The whirl of paper sheets printing out onto the catch tray added texture to the sounds of sucking in the cramped room, and, to your absolute horror and slight arousal, Stevenson gagged Newstrom with a balled-up copy of the story and bent her over the machine.

As you pass in front of the conference room, Newstrom will give you an evil eye, her own memory of the copy room affair reflecting in her right pupil and flip her middle finger at you. Keep walking, she'll appear to say, with what looks to be a crumb from the crust of a sandwich cradled in the corner of her mouth. Attempt to ignore the zoological spectacles you'll soon come across, she'll seem to say.

A few offices later, the new creative writing professor — Greg Grimely — will be cutting a line of cocaine atop a stack of stories to be distributed in a writing workshop that evening. The hundred-dollar bill he'll roll into a straw will remain stiff and resist the process before eventually curling into an instrument designed for Grimely's pleasure. He'll point to a second line as you pass by and gesture an offer to partake with him. You'll most likely consider it, but a memory will light up in your mind of teaching a lecture on acid, when the students blurred into skunk apes and you sweat through your blazer thinking they might attack, so you'll simply shake your head no to Grimely and keep moving.

In her office, Dr Gloria Tallent, the longest tenured professor in the department, will sit with her forehead down on the desk, a clear sign of exhausted exasperation, fluorescent lights off and with only the ambient light of the window providing a glow around her. Never lifting her head, her eyes closed and facing downward, she'll pour a perfect shot of tequila and drink the liquor through a curling straw that reaches below her desk. In the corner, on an ornate wooden chair, her husband will sit, the pale and fleshy aura of the dead on his face, the thin, rubber tube of an insulin pump running into the sleeve of his blazer. You'll have heard that he's been struggling with insanely high triglyceride levels after his third double bypass surgery and you won't be sure on which side of the veil between the living and the dead he resides, but you'll

know to mind your business. They'll have endured the politics of this building long enough to warrant a trust in handling their own affairs.

A student will sit on the far side of one of the classrooms where the Franco Zeffirelli-directed version of *Taming of the Shrew* will be playing on the projector screen. He'll be leaning back against the nonexistent wall, barely contained within the confines of his wire-thin desk, one leg out wide into the aisle, eyes towards the ground as Elizabeth Taylor emotes under a heavy shade of mascara on the screen.

You'll look closer, wondering if the student has fallen asleep, only to recognize the up-and-down motion of his arm and hand. An audible gasp will escape your tightened throat as you attempt to be shocked by such brazen, public masturbation, as though you haven't seen this before. As though five lecturers hadn't been fired for masturbating on camera during the sudden move to online classes three apocalypses before. You'll consider interrupting to say something, but the professor for this class will have cut you off in the parking lot that morning. You'll owe him nothing.

It will almost be time for your next class to begin, so you'll start walking to your own classroom on the first floor. A student you taught your first semester at this university will sit in an office next to the elevators. One of your colleagues will have his arm wrapped around her shoulders and be whispering into her right ear, his lips brushing along the lobe. You'll see him touch her chin, her pull away. He'll grab her hand. She'll look up into his eyes before he kisses her cheek, his tongue lingering longer than his lips as though he's testing to see if he's added enough salt to her saliva.

Outrage will billow from your chest, and you won't hesitate to say something this time. You'll fumble the invisible doorknob and enter, left foot dragging along the carpet, your chest imploding with a deeply held exhale. Don't harass that woman, you'll likely try to shout with all the bravado of John Wayne or JK Rowling ignoring their own hypocrisies, though the words will wheeze out in barely a gasp.

The professor will stand erect from his chair and ask you to leave and your former student will roll her eyes. You will not be tenured like this professor, so you'll feel compelled to comply, to back out the room, to swallow the taste of soap that is rising in your throat.

Later, when you report the incident to the department chair, barely able to see her from behind a stack of dissertations she is signing off on, she'll simply laugh and call the incident symptomatic in relation to the course of human affairs. These things happen, she'll assert and send you out the door, no reason to cause a stir.

You'll stand outside her office door, collecting your breath, thinking about the way she'll have said this, as though, in the pauses of her speech, she is recognizing you as an outsider to this world, as though the thermodynamics of interpersonal relationships in academia are lost on a rube like you. It takes three generations after escaping poverty, her tone will suggest, and a greater adherence to strict binary systems to understand why codes of conduct only apply to some, and as you walk away, you'll catch a reflection of half your face in the glare of the television screen listing the faculty directory.

The reflection will be like that of the Ghost of Christmas Future, skullish and pale. Your hair will form a dark hood in the impressionistic shading, and you'll rush to the bathroom to make sure it's only an illusion in the static of the screen. The mirror will confirm what you've always known — that you're a woman whose ass looks spectacular in a tight black skirt, that curtain bangs and a shag haircut will never not be in style, that you should wing your eyeliner more often. You'll breathe in your own ambient femininity, pull the short leather jacket tight across your shoulders, and walk back to your office, the muffled snaps of your boots hitting the tile, echoing through otherwise hushed hallways.

In the afternoon, when you enter a subterranean room to teach your second class of the day, you'll probably apologize for running a little late. This apocalypse is a tad overwhelming, you'll say. You might feel defeated, believing this apocalypse to be worse than the one when it was just one of the neighborhood dogs that had disappeared. You never say it, but you look forward to seeing your students, believe them to be a stabilizing force in a vanishing world, regard them as regenerative forces developing a new vocabulary with a new set of hurdles in front of them — hurdles that look almost identical to the old ones you're still struggling to hobble over.

And you'll remember that first semester of college, a decade-and-a-half before the next apocalypse, two months after you endured your second apocalypse on your sister's bathroom floor, blood gliding across the tile from an open wound on your wrist where you'd cut it after your mother called you a fag. In your first composition classroom as a student, below ceiling tiles with middles sagging in the humidity, the scar on your wrist still raw and purple, you watched the professor write a sentence on the board from your homework the week before. *I do not fear the apocalypse because I have lived it and will live it again.* This, he said citing you, is where critical thought meets resilience and forges creativity. You didn't understand what he meant in that moment, only knowing that you had created something of elegance for someone after so many years of being told that beauty was beyond your grasp.

That moment was so infinitesimally delicate, but there's something about the compliment that blooms in your mind and spurs you on through the next ten years, through grad school, through the consistent escalation of your vocabulary in every argument with your mother before she'll ask if you're too good for your family now. Through your first gay heartbreak with sunlight breaking through the blinds onto empty, sweat-soaked sheets. Through the note asking *what is this crap?* in permanent marker on the back of the first story you'll submit in a writing workshop. And on that afternoon the day after the walls disappear and expose your failures at upkeep, you'll be standing with a marker in your hand, looking for a whiteboard on which to write a quote from one of your students' papers.

Your students will look up at you, their eyes on the marker in your hand, as though this apocalypse were the same as the last and the same as the next. You'll notice the newly purchased sheets of drywall stacked in the corner. The screws, the mesh tape, the mud made from a glittering gypsum compound sitting on the floor by their desks. And you'll ask if they want to get to work.

By the end of class, they will have finished rebuilding the walls, just a millimeter thicker than before, just a touch of added reinforcement for when a hungover peer loses their balance walking to a desk. And one student will promise to bring paint during office hours as they exit the door to return to a world beyond this story.

And the walls?

The walls will be whole and primed and ready to disappear.

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