

A Greater Feat
by Eric Cecil

Every time he blinks the lights go out. When he sleeps the world ceases to exist. It reappears when he wakes. He does not know how or why. He keeps the questions to himself and has therefore forgotten them. In the living room he sits on an unadorned wooden bench and experiments with the undoing and remaking of the world: blinking or closing his eyes until drifting off into sleep, softly obliterating everything and, upon waking, recalling it back into being.

He tires of it. Grows bored with the cheap tricks. Desires a greater feat. One day he steps into his worn shoes and retreats to the basement. It's already dark down there, even without his blinking, without the willful closing of his eyes. Down here, he says aloud, his voice deadening as he lowers himself onto the close and blackened stairway, Down here there's nothing. But still he finds the solid floor with his feet, still he ambles into the darkness, arms extended, hands fanning before him. The light of the doorway disappears somewhere above and behind. He wanders ahead into the nothingness until he touches the slither of a dangling thread. He loses it, leans forward, scissors his hands until he finds it again. It whispers between his fingers. He twirls it around fore and middle, pulls it taut, its resonant click startling him, its dim light quivering from a low ceiling, haloing a portion of the large, unfinished space. The light creates it, he tells himself. Exists it.

Through narrowed eyes he surveys what he and the light have willed into being: the walls of exposed brick that someone has carelessly slathered with white paint, the crooked columns of tattered boxes, the shiny black garbage bags filled with plaster and cracked boards, which poke and powder through the bundles like so many skeletal fragments, so many fossilized remains. These, he muses, are probably the scraps of an old apartment somewhere in the building: one that has since been renovated. The bags speak of a time before him. He walks to them and divots the bulk of one with his toe and thinks, I could put my head inside and tie it off. Could disappear everything. Everyone. Myself.

He doesn't. Turns to the wall instead. Eases toward the painted brick, blinking it away and calling it back, and traces its surface with an outstretched hand, following it to a nearby corner. The light is too weak to reach here. It can only gloss the outline of a series of circular displays. They are, he notes, like the faces of small clocks. They house delicate, trembling meters, barely visible behind the opacity of their glass cylinders. Vertical levers flank each. He reaches out to the one closest, toying with the red plastic casing of its tapered end, then hesitates as he spots another lever just beyond his reach. This one is much larger. It accompanies a display the size of a grand timepiece. Someone has written something unintelligible in marker on the lower half of its metal casing. He thumbs the writing and is neither surprised nor justified in noting that it does

not smudge. Does not err. Not until he shuts his eyes. Then the writing disappears, and so do the displays, the levers, the basement. So does he.

He opens his eyes and exists everything again and, standing on his toes, reaches out to the largest lever. He drags its heft downward. The sensation is like tearing. When the dim light cuts to a flat and final black he pretends that he has torn the lights from the world or has torn the world from the lights or has ripped himself away from all. It has gone. Even the sounds, the imperceptible hum of the meters that he had not previously noticed: they, too, are gone. He is in silence. He is in darkness. There is nothing.

But another noise. In the void of the basement he can hear the stirring above: the clamor of a door, maybe, or a gate of some sort, followed by the unmistakable percussion of footsteps. He closes his eyes again, willing darkness to darkness, listening. The knocking of heels nears, as if funneling from the sky, as if spiraling like a bomb, circling like a serpent and he opens his eyes as the steps explode into the bark of wood against wood somewhere above and behind him. The door. He spies, then, an irruption: a thin beam of light that picks out the depression of the nearest steps, the white paint of the adjacent wall, the seams of brickwork beneath. The thin light darts over these details, tilts downward, slants by the boxes in the corner. The knocking builds into a drumming. The thin light strobes near his worn shoes and he sidesteps away from it and into the corner, back toward the boxes, lowering to his haunches behind them.

A pause. A shuffling somewhere to the side: a roil of feet, arches cupping the smooth concrete floor. The thin beam of light fluttering over the bags.

I'm not here, he tells himself. I am not behind these boxes in the basement. Any basement. Anywhere.

He can't close his eyes hard enough. But he hears the shuffling, the breathing. Softens his own breath and callouses his face like a fist. Still he cannot remove the world nor himself from it and in desperation he plugs both ears with his index fingers. Fingers like pistols, he tells himself. He flicks the hammers of his thumbs at each temple. Silence.

He does not hear the reversal of the lever but feels, somehow, the darkness soften, the meters trembling again behind their displays. The light rebounds its halo, diffusing darkness. Again he blinks and moves to look around the shelter of boxes and sinks, instead, into the larger shadow now darkening the scant light of the corner. A figure. A person.

Standing over him, face stubbled by shadow or shadowed by stubble, mouth hinging from large ears, lips tearing a deeper and darker hole below the bend of a crooked nose. The voice is a murmur as imperceptible as the writing on the displays. He closes his eyes but cannot blink the

man away, cannot pistol his fingers deep enough into the ears. The blows come. And with them, brighter lights, exploding suns and attendant galaxies willed by fists that hickey his head.