



It's all gone.

There is nothing.

I am laid the bed, on more Benzos than Judy Garland at the end and I am staring at the wall.  
The blank, white wall.

The late autumn daylight fades away, seeping the colour from the sky and cloaks the room in a grey mourning coat. I haven't been out of the room in days, only the cycles of light clue me in as to the changing days.

Now that I have thought of Dorothy, I suddenly think to myself:

I  
am

m  
e  
l  
tinnnnnng

and for some reason, this makes me laugh out loud in the silent room.

The staccato 'ha' bounces off of the white wall and not for the first time I think about how much this room reminds me of a cell. All I need is a strait jacket.

I look down at my arm and am surprised to find that my skin isn't green. This makes me laugh to no one again.

I know that I am going mad. It's unexpectedly prosaic though, this madness. Even in the middle of going insane I feel like it should be more '*Jabberwocky*' than Prufrock: fewer coffee spoons and more gyre and gimble in the wabe.

Time makes no sense anymore, I bounce between doses of drugs or drinking binges, never not drunk or hungover... But things still get dusty in my bedroom. My housemate still knocks on my door every Wednesday and reminds me that it's bin day tomorrow. Graham next door still gets in his green Nissan every morning at 8.15 and returns to his parking bay at 5.30, just in time for '*Neighbours*'. Every evening the streetlights still come on and go off, some nights I see both dances of the ballet. The world is apparently still full of things even if everything inside of me is gone.

I still get text messages from Nicola and voicemails from Paul asking me to phone them. They haven't returned John's calls, the messages say. They won't return them. They're on my side. They'll always be on my side.

I delete the messages and stop listening to the voicemails.

To the right of the bed are still the blu-taked up birthday cards from six weeks before, each one of them with the number loud and riotous in the middle of the action.

# 21! Woo hoo!

*You're a proper adult now!*

# Everything's just beginning!

I never shuffle past them or open my eyes to them without muttering that they should fuck off, as though they're doing it on purpose, as though I didn't put them up there only a few weeks ago. I think often of taking them down and throwing them in the bin, but that would involve so much more energy than I have. John's is already gone though, ripped down and the blu-tak left behind still clinging to a tiny shard of card. The sight of that hurts as much as the sight of the card did and I know that I could take the blu-tak down from the wall too, but I would still know that the card had been there. I will always know that the card had been there.

I jammed John's card into the middle of the copy of William Blake that he gave me for Christmas the year that I was 16. As a little joke to myself that doesn't make me laugh, I put it between the plates of *'Little Girl Lost'* and *'Little Girl Found'* and keep imagining telling him that. *'He'll appreciate that.'* I think, and then I catch myself on it like a scratchy nail on a woolly glove.

He won't appreciate it. He won't appreciate anything that I tell him ever again. I won't ever tell him anything again.

Unless it's to go and fuck himself, I suppose.

Melting does feel like an accurate word though; I am dissolving, disappearing. Literally, because my entire diet is vodka and Valium and I have lost two stone, but figuratively too. My sanity has dissolved like salt in water, and I am becoming brine: distilled and caustic. I cannot think of how I am supposed to purify myself to get the salt out. And because it all seems so hopeless, I double down and souse my organs in poison; the salt of my tears, the pickling solutions that I pour into my mouth each evening and leave me hungover every morning. Whatever I was has truly gone, gone away. I am toxic to touch now. I stagger out of bed each day, the shakes of alcohol withdrawal trembling through me and catch sight of myself in the mirror, surprised to still have a reflection.

My never healthy relationship with alcohol has turned completely dysfunctional, even I can see that. I am either drunk or hungover for almost every hour of every day. One night a lad down the pub who's friends with our dubious housemate Donny has some Speed, which I take despite both its unknown provenance and the fact that Simon has told me he will ring my mother if I start down this path. I tell Simon to fuck off and take the Speed.

Within five minutes I feel as though my heart has been put back together and I know that absolutely



It is a few weeks later and Giles should probably have sacked me, or at the very least warned me some time ago for my shambolism. I am so clearly hungover, sometimes probably still drunk from the night before. I am frequently late, and I space out for minutes at a time, sometimes when customers are actively asking me a question. But still, he just edges around me, looking concerned. That's how I know how bad I must look. I think that I could start stealing from the till and he still wouldn't say anything.

The rest of the week I stay in my room, or I hang out with my housemates if I can face it. Sometimes I go out to the pub and get utterly wasted. I drink wherever I am, but the pub nights are the ones when I get most drunk. My friends look at me with the same worried eyes that Giles has now, the same worried eyes that my parents have. Simon hasn't yet phoned my mum, but I can see that he's days away from it. Everyone is talking about me now, about how sad and out of control I am.

One hungover afternoon a friend of Simon's comes around with a DVD of '*Angels in America*'. I only vaguely know what it is but within 20 minutes I am crying. All of those men, dead of a plague that they caught from love; I can relate to that.

We don't have any contact. It is probably better this way. I keep saying that in my head: *it is probably better this way.*

I listen to a lot of Smiths, a lot of Beatles. Some Elton John. Music that my parents played when I was little, Ray Charles and Smokey Robinson. Music that I loved when I was 12 and 13, The Barenaked Ladies and post-Take That *'Life Thru a Lens'* that I had thought was so deep. I play the music that belongs to me and to my childhood, to my parents. Not the music that belongs to John, to John and I, to all of these past five, six, seven years.

I listen to music obsessively for a month or so, until I decide one drunken night to listen to John's copy of *'Holidays in Eden'* that I find in the bottom of the bookcase. I get through *'No One Can'* without even crying and think that I am okay, think that I am too brined and dried out and cured to feel anything anymore. But then the opening bars of *'Waiting to Happen'* literally hits me in the gut and I have to run to the bin by the side of my desk to be sick.

I am sick four times and then five and then six in the four minutes of the song, heaving over the bin liner and feeling as gutted as a dead, salted fish.

It's not the music. This song holds no particular sentiment for me, it was not one of John's favourites and I cannot remember a time that we ever listened to it together. It is John's voice that has made me vomit into the bin, John's voice which is causing me to sob over the plastic of the wastepaper basket like a person who has truly lost their mind. It was only three months ago, that night in Stratford-Upon-Avon, high on the summer's evening and Shakespeare and white wine that smelt like lemons.

I had forgotten the conversation until now though. Until I heard the song.

‘You’ve got a nice nose.’ This is apropos of precisely nothing. My nice nose is in my wine glass when he says this.

‘Cheers!’ I say, but I pause. ‘Weird change of topic though.’

‘I was just thinking about your face.’ He answers. I raise an eyebrow, confused. ‘I was thinking that you aren’t beautiful...’ I splutter in indignation,

‘Wow!’ I exclaim. ‘Love you too!’ and I laugh.

‘No, no, listen,’ he says, laughing too now, affectionate, hand on my arm, soft eyes like the runny centres of underdone eggs, ‘you *aren’t* beautiful. But your face is incredibly *appealing*. Like it’s *exactly* how it’s meant to be.’ I am really laughing now, and he is smiling broadly.

‘You are pissed.’ I say, not sugar-coating it.

‘I am.’ He agrees. ‘But I am right about this. Mathematically or something your face is just... right. It’s lovely. I could look at it forever. That’s true. I am not just saying that because I’m drunk.’ I smile into my glass of wine, knowing that I should probably be insulted but loving him more than anybody else ever has.

Loving him more than anybody else ever *will*.

After a moment or two I swallow and I laugh.

‘Yours too.’ I say. He screws up his eyes and shakes his head.

‘God, no, I’m a gargoyle.’ He sort-of-laughs but sort of doesn’t. I put my hand over his on the sticky, pub table and I am still laughing. But then I look at his face and am surprised to find myself staring into the eyes of a little boy. It is incredible, like magic. I have never seen this version of him before.

I  
will never  
see it  
again.

I stop laughing.

‘Oh, John.’ I say now.

I am surprised to find myself tearing-up and I feel like an idiot suddenly. I squeeze his hand. I feel stupid, but that little boy is still there inside his eyes, and I can’t not say it. ‘You *are* beautiful.’ He doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t break my gaze. The child in his eyes has never been told that they were beautiful, no one ever sung him that lullaby. I think of words from childhood now, vague, and half-forgotten, but there:

*‘Beautiful baby,  
child of my dreams,  
the sandman says maybe he’ll bring you a dream,  
up where the girls fly on ribbons and bows,  
where babies float by, just counting their toes...’*

He doesn’t say anything in response, he just squeezes my hand back and I can see the tears in his own eyes and it’s both awful and wonderful all at once, the vulnerability of him.

‘Only to...’ he begins, but I cut him off.

‘...Don’t make a joke.’ I say. There is silence. He closes his watery eyes.



He doesn't try and carry on with what he was going to say. Instead, he breathes out, one long sigh that goes on for longer than seems usual. His eyes are still shut, but then they blink open, and I expect the burden in them to be gone and am surprised when it isn't. Then he says:

*'We talked about our faces ,  
You said you didn't like yours.  
I said, 'I disagree'.'*

There is a moment and I blink because I know the lyrics and I remember the song, although perhaps I only really heard it once, on one of those CDs he made me back at the start, when I would listen to them like I was revising for an exam on love. It is too heavy and too real, and I know that he is telling me that I am beautiful without saying the words and I appreciate that probably more than if he had just outright told me that I was beautiful; I wouldn't have believed the words, but I believe this.

But it is too heavy and too real anyway, even like this and I won't be able to acknowledge it without crying, so I make a joke anyway. because I am weak and inauthentic and not strong enough and not substantial enough. I never was. The gap before I can make the joke is a void though. A heavy, aching nothing.

'Please John, if you're going to quote love songs to me, at least let them have been songs that made an impact on the charts.' He smiles widely and laughs heartily. He is relieved to have been given a way out too.

And the  
little boy  
that I  
glimpsed

for just a  
moment

is never  
seen again.

I lay on the carpet next to the vomit-filled bin for so long that the CD spins back around to the start and the jaunty electro-pop of '*Cover My Eyes (Pain and Heaven)*' which, in spite of myself, I still quite like.

Once the memory of that night has sufficiently faded enough to stop me from being physically sick, I stagger across the room and press the 'drawer open' button so that the music abruptly stops in the middle of the lyric '*Like the girl in the novel in the wind on the moors...*'

'Fuck you.' I say out loud to nobody.

I pluck the disc from the machine and fling it, and the blue, plastic case it came in, out of the open window beside me. I hear the case shatter as it falls onto the street below.

I avoid listening to music on purpose for years after that. I never turn on that stereo ever again.

I avoid music like I avoid Penicillin, knowing that it is likely to put me in the hospital.

It is a dark a lot, even for December; even the daylight is a shade underneath what it should be. At home with my parents and sister they have put up the Christmas tree and the fairy lights; I manage to smile and say that they're nice, but they feel sarcastic.

'At least Christmas might cheer you up a bit!' my father says. I don't answer, although I don't disagree because my family so desperately want me to snap out of it. I have been walking around like a hollow-eyed ghost for eight weeks now and they so want me to be better. I nod and say 'hopefully!' but when I come home late one night to find them still on and everybody else already in bed, I snap them off at the plug, killing the blinking joy of yuletide and wondering if I could strangle myself with the chord.

Instead, I walk into the kitchen and drink a third of a bottle of neat gin in one hit.

In front of my parent's sarcastic Christmas tree that weekend, I cry like a baby at the X Factor winner singing a song called '*A Moment Like This*'. This is a low point on so many levels and I tell myself to get a grip, but I can't... those lyrics, oh those fucking lyrics. The stab in the guts, the stab in the heart.

*'Some people search forever  
For that one special kiss  
I can't believe it's happening to me  
Some people wait a lifetime  
For a moment like this...'*

This is why I stopped listening to music, I think. The thing is, it's fucking *everywhere*. It's not so bad in the pub when you're off your face, but I went to Boots this afternoon and they were playing '*Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*'. I wanted to slit my own throat with a Venus Comfort Glide.

I drink to forget because I can't help remembering and music doesn't help that. It is involuntary, I can remember everything. I wish that my memory had been this good when I was doing history A Level.

I remember kissing in the park and sore lips.  
I remember being battered and the delicious ache of the bruises that felt like a kiss.  
A kiss with a fist is better than none.

I remember when he loved me.

I remember so much joy that I thought I couldn't possibly contain it all in my coat.  
I remember fear and loathing in Lambeth, Lewisham, the Limehouse Basin and Lincoln's Inn Fields.

There just isn't anything left anymore. Nothing to hope for, nothing to imagine, nothing to get out of bed for. I have loved John from the time that I was a child; I have loved him for as long as I have been me.

If I don't have John, what do I have?

I phone him one night and say that onto the hollow silence of his answer phone. His wife sends me a text message:

*Stop phoning the house.*

I reply:

*He was mine just as much as he was yours.*

She comes straight back:

*He was never yours.*

And the truth of that sentence means that I cry until I fall asleep on top of another half a litre of cheap vodka, thrown back through ugly, snotty heartbreak.

He was never hers either, of course; he's no one and never was or ever will be.

But knowing that doesn't make me feel any better.

He's in Sarah's house at least.

One month and three days later I go to the first class of The New Normal. I feel flayed, like I have lost a layer of skin, burnt almost. I am pretty sure that everyone is looking at me, that everyone has heard the awful, awful story. I worry out loud about this to Simon, the only person who knows the whole story.

'I told a couple of our friends that you and John were over, and you'd taken it hard.' He replies, getting his folder and pens out of his rucksack. 'But only because they wondered where you'd gone.' It's not that I don't trust Simon, it's just that I feel so exposed. Perhaps everyone in the seminar group just thinks that I have had a terrible illness.

Today is apparently how the wisdom of cinema writing can help us in other genres. The tutor dives straight in by telling us that Alfred Hitchcock maintained that the way to keep your audience interested is to 'never let the bomb go off'. '*Once it is done, it is done.*' She writes on a white board on wheels. I see Simon write that down in the seat next to me and so I write it too:



For the next hour and a half that is all I write, over and over, under the stark light of the strip-bulbs: Once it is done, it is done. Once it is done, it is done. Once it is done, it is done. Where there aren't words there are spikes, biroed lines and slashes.

I don't think that I had realised how angry I was until now.

The bomb has well and truly gone off of course. My eardrums are perforated. My right arm has been blown off.

The bookshelf has gaps. The absence is him, his books, thrown into a cardboard box and dumped on his doorstep with a scrawled note: *'Dear John, Fuck you.'*

I am laid the bed again, on fewer Benzos than before but drunker than I was that day. I wonder now what he did with those books when he got them back...did he put them back on his own shelves? Pretend that it all never happened, that I never happened?

I imagine him taking them from the box, putting them back into the bookcase as though none of this ever happened. That's exactly the kind of thing he would do.

I have started to plug these gaps with my own new books.

but there are still glaring holes.

I have put all of the books he ever bought me in a line on the mantel piece above the dusty fireplace while I think about what to do about them. I haven't had the strength yet to look through them and decide what to keep and what I want to burn in a fire.

I get up off the bed for the first time in hours, stand on the bed and with one fell swoop I knock all of the remaining books from the mantel piece. I don't want them anyway, I suddenly realise. Not one of them. All that that they do is remind me.

I watch

them

fall

to

the

floor and

end

in a

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pile

and I don't care.

They stay in that pile on the floor for the next four months.

I am worried that the nothingness will swallow me. To compensate for all of the absence, I have the TV on in the background all day and all night, the radio too. Sometimes I have both on in different corners of the same room, competing for my ear, news of Alexander Litvinenko's burial in a lead-lined coffin mingling with the comforting babble of '*Countdown*' contestants.

When even that doesn't work, I do Sudokus. I very rarely finish them, I am not very good at them, but I collect them from newspapers in pubs and that plonk onto the front mat for free and tear them out, leaving them all over my room and picking them up at random when I can't get Radio 4 or LBC or 'Cash in the Attic' to fill up the space inside of me.

At night I cannot fall asleep unless I am paralytically drunk or sufficiently drugged (or both) so I do that. I always do that. But sometimes the void's jaws are still too close, it's teeth too sharp. So, I put on all of the lights, the TV tuned to the BBC News Channel, radio on some natterly phone-in on 5Live until the The Shipping Forecast is over and I won't have to hear the weirdly haunting words that bother me for reasons that I can't quite articulate. 5Live is great at midnight, the insomniacs and the mentally ill of London ranting about car parks and street lights. I don't feel so mad with them around. I pick up one of my many Sudokus from the pile on the side and I fall asleep with the pencil in my hand and numbers, only insignificant numbers and routine news at the front of my brain, not John or the lack of him and his books.

It is almost the end of the year now. I am still staring at the gaps.

I remember a poem or a bit from a book, because I always remember a poem or a bit from a book: I am doomed to live a life with a head full of quotations:

*'You can see how it was'.*

The fat gap in the bookcase by the wardrobe used to have John's green 1990 'Norton Anthology' in it, next to my 2003 edition. Mine is yellow, his was green. Mine looks lonely now.

I always fantasised about our house, the one we would live in one day, and the bookcases. I imagined putting all of the books that we had in common together, rows and rows of what we had in common:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>'High Fidelity'</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Jude the Obscure'</b></p> <p><i>(That's a beautiful book' I had said to him, the first night that I spent in his house. 'You're a beautiful girl.' He had replied.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy'</b></p> <p><i>(The very first book he had ever recommended to me, when I was 12.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Hobbit'</b></p> <p><i>(My copy was illustrated. I needed the pictures. He said that I was wrong.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Secret History'</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Being and Nothingness'</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Angela's Ashes'</b></p> <p><i>(It made me cry. John told me that I had fallen into a hole of literary manipulation.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Beloved'</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Ulysses'</b></p> <p><i>(Neither copy entirely read)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Chocolat'</b></p>	<p><i>(I had brought his copy as a gift; he didn't like the film as much as I did, which he said was because I was only watching it for Johnny Depp)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'To Kill a Mockingbird'</b></p> <p><i>( 'Sanctimonious' had been my review at 14. 'We won't make an English teacher out of you with that attitude.' He had replied.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'On the Road'</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'A Short History of Nearly Everything'</b></p> <p><i>(He brought me my copy for my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. On the title page he had written 'for the girl who knows almost everything... here is the rest of it.')</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Sun Also Rises'</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Time Traveller's Wife'</b></p> <p><i>(I had cried for a week. He had called me a twat.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Lord of The Rings'</b></p> <p><i>(Never my thing, but I read it for him.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Grapes of Wrath'</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Second Sex'</b></p>	<p><i>(I'd read my copy; he had never read his)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Lolita'</b></p> <p><i>(The less said about this the better.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Lion, the Witch &amp; the Wardrobe'</b></p> <p><i>(his falling-apart late 60s edition, my opulently illustrated late 80s edition that he said was the literary embodiment of our different experiences of childhood)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Lady Chatterley's Lover'</b></p> <p><i>(we had both brought our individual copies of these when masturbatory material had been otherwise lacking during our teenage years)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Sophie's Choice'</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'The Catcher in the Rye'</b></p> <p><i>(A review we could agree on when I was 14: 'That was dross!' I declared after another recommendation.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>'Notes from a Small Island'</b></p>
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All of these individuals and their many companions that had been living in our bookcases, watching our lives, now united with the twin that they didn't even know that they had. Perhaps we would dedicate a whole bookcase to everything that proved we were the same, he and I.

Our children would ask why we had two of all of these books and I would tell them it was because their mother and father were the same and now, we had made them, made them the same.

I would show them their father's copy of *'The Sea, The Sea'* and the annotations that I made in it when he lent it to me. How he had told me later that he knew he loved me when he had first seen my loopy pencilled annotation:

*Let us not waste love,  
it is rare enough.*

And he would tell them of how he had run his fingerprints over my copied-words and tried to stop himself from loving me when he was 26 and I was 13.

*'But I couldn't.'* He would have told them. *'That is why you exist.'*

He is more myself than I am, I think, looking at those gaps. I imagine jumping into his grave with him and decomposing alongside his flesh and find it strangely comforting. I like the idea of he and I dead together, becoming dust. There would be no absence of him inside our shared tomb, at least we would be together.

As it is he takes every form, haunts me, drives me mad, leaves me in this abyss where I cannot find him.

I stare at the space in the room where my children are not and find it impossible to imagine any offspring of my own who are not his too.

Without him, I don't even have any imaginary children.

And then one night as I am falling asleep, drunk of course, I wake to the sound of 'Sailing By' before The Shipping Forecast.

I am so inexplicably gripped by terror and pain that I finally decide to do it.

It is as easy as that in the end.

*'The general synopsis at midnight: High west Sole 1028 expected east Sole 1019 by midday tomorrow. Low southern Portugal 1010 losing its identity. The area forecasts for the next 24 hours. Viking, North Utsire: Northwesterly 4 or 5, occasionally 6 at first. Moderate or rough. Occasional rain. Good, occasionally poor'*

I turn off the radio and pop the 12 Valium I have left from their blister packet and swallow them with the glass of water on the side of the bed.

Which actually turns out to be gin.

I shut my eyes and the world drops dead.

John, my love, you have become a story, a myth, an idea, a poem. I think I made you up inside my head.

Bitter bile at the back of my throat from the Valium and the gin regurgitates upwards and even almost gone, I shiver with distaste at the flavour on my tongue. I cough into Desdemona's hanky, tight in my fist.

*'Thy drugs are quick.'*

'Wrong play.' I think, as I die.

I am disappointed to wake 15 hours later.

It is New Year's Eve.

I have a headache, but I am most definitely still alive.