

Now I cannot decipher what all the static is
But I got a pretty good read on your black thoughts.

The passion that makes me feel alive again
It's gonna be the death, the death of us
The passion that makes me feel alive again
Oh, it's gonna be the death, the death of us
Death of us.

March 17th, 2023

8:00 PM

Tampa International Airport

My iPhone feels heavier in my hand than normal. As sweat collects against my palm, I drop it, but the white headphones jammed into my ears keep it from crashing onto the tile. A rush of air fills my lungs as my heart rate increases. Little things like this have gotten under my skin as of late. They have ever since James Evans decided to make it his mission to “teach” me the error of my ways. Did it start in New Orleans? No. It was before then. The Twelve Person Tag? Maybe. At this point, I am not sure when it matters.

Time feels so strange. It's as if it's no longer linear. Events are just blips in a fog I can no longer navigate. It gets worse when I am angry or upset, and I don't think I could be any more upset if I tried. I can feel my bones shaking. Just thinking about James sends me into a rage.

Inhale. One. Two. Three. Four.
Hold. One. Two. Three. Four.
Exhale. One. Two. Three. Four.

Apparently, the brain can only do two things at once. The thought process is, if you are focused on breathing and counting, your brain is incapable of holding onto anxious thoughts. But as I count, I cannot help but feel the blood rushing up my neck like a river. I cannot stop the bouncing of my foot. I cannot keep my face from flushing.

I'm sure here, in this moment, I look suspicious. Wouldn't it be hilarious if the TSA came and took me back? At least out of all this I'd have a story to tell. I can see the headlines now:

Local professional wrestler has a complete meltdown at Tampa International Airport.
Mediocre wrestler gets pinned by TSA!

A sigh escapes me. At this point it's a completely involuntary movement. Air just.. leaves whenever it feels like it, as if there's some valve in my lungs to release the pressure that builds up.

Calm down, Elizabeth. An airport isn't the place? But there really isn't a good place, is there? There are only different degrees of bad. This would probably be one of the worst places for hysterics. Then again, it's better than in the air. Again. Degrees.

My therapist says I try to intellectualize my suffering. I suppose this is evidence. I could just be in the present and let it happen. I'd probably get over it quicker. But my brain just... doesn't let me? Life is a catastrophe, all the time.

Everything is an emergency.

—

November 3, 2022
Tampa, Florida

tick.

t i c k
Tick

tick

I used to sleep through thunderstorms. Entire hurricanes could pass in the night, and I would dream of sun kissed mornings. Now, depending on how my body wants to cooperate, a creak of the hardwood, a breeze a bit too strong, a dog barking in the distance, a clock... they all have the power to disrupt my dream cycle. Most days, it does not matter. I can sleep until afternoon and repay all the debt of restless nights. Any other line of work would be a hellscape, or maybe it would force my body to recalculate. Who knows?

As my eyes open, I realize it is not yet morning. No light presses against the blinds asking to be let in. The room is only enveloped in another layer of darkness. I listen carefully for any evidence of movement, but there is no guilty party. Salem must have fallen asleep in the living room or the guest room. The fridge is safe, for now.

With great effort, I roll over and snatch my phone from the bedside table. The motion lights up the screen, forcing my eyes shut. 3:43. Damn. It is still early. Really early. I turn my phone over and place it screen first into the pillow so no light escapes, turning my attention back to the darkness.

There are only three days until my Adrenaline Title defense, and frankly, I am a nervous wreck. It is not enough to face Alexis Quinne or Bree Lancaster, two of my best friends in the industry, but I have to take them on at once.

The truth is, this is both a blessing and a curse. I have beaten Alexis before. If I had not already accomplished it, I would have no hope that I could. I search, very hard at times, to find a piece

of me that believes I can beat Bree. I have not found it yet. No matter how much I strategize, no matter how much I consider the possibility, I do not think I can make Bree tap out or pin her shoulders to the mat. I will have to isolate Alexis, but that is so much easier said than done.

I sit up, wiping the newly formed beads of sweat from my brow. To think, I could lose my first title in my second defense. It's unthinkable. It makes me wonder...

What would have happened if Majestic never went out of business? What about UWF? What would have happened if I was allowed to carry those World Championships into the future? Would I have survived a single defense? A second? How long would it have taken for disappointment to inevitably come for me, as she always does?

Perhaps, back then, I would have been successful. Maybe... back then things would have been different. I was certainly younger. I was much more agile. I was more vicious and determined and confident. It could be the case **that** Elizabeth would have overcome the competition and risen to an elite level.

We'll never know.

All we have are the jokes, those whispers in the back of the locker room: if she gets close to a World Title, the place is about to go under. It's a flattering legacy. Datura: The Harbinger of Unemployment. Here, in the confines of this room, it is almost amusing. But the truth of it is that none of them ever took me seriously. Why would they? They had a point. I had never been able to plant my feet at the top of the mountain. It was always chase, chase, chase. Once I got my hands on the prize?

We'll never know.

Fourteen years is a long time to wonder. I took it for granted. I clawed and scraped and chased all over again to get to this point. And now that I'm here? I don't think I can hack it.

I move my legs off the bed, allowing the sheet to slide off and crumple to the floor. Every single inch of skin is slick with sweat. The air whipping around the room causes a shiver to run down my entire body. I wait until the tension leaves my body to make my way to the door and trudge into the living room.

My hand traverses the empty air until it finds the back of the couch. Trying my best to be quiet, I peek over. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, they fall upon empty cushions. Good for her. She actually made it to bed.

Using the couch to balance, I circle the room and step into the kitchen. The sight of my empty beer bottles uncovers a sliver of happiness underneath the dread, faint memories of the smiles and laughs we shared before bed. Instinctively, I reach out to begin the process of cleaning, but

stop short. These are the circumstances I would normally clean in, but that's when I am alone. All that glass would cause too much of a commotion.

I gaze toward the guest bedroom. With no light, the doorway appears to be a gateway to an even darker abyss. I chuckle at the thought and begin to make my way back to my own room. Two competing voices begin to pluck at the strings of my anxiety.

Check on her. Don't wake her.
Check on her. Don't wake her.
Don't wake her. Check on her.

I'm thrown from the thoughts by a heavy footstep which causes the floorboard to shriek. I hold my breath and look back, waiting for a groan or yell to follow. Yet, all stays quiet. I exhale in relief and giggle to myself. Well, what's the harm? Sure, she can be downright terrifying when she wakes up, but I will just avoid that entirely. Besides, she's so cute when she's sleeping.

Using what little prowess in stealth I possess, I tip-toe across the house, making sure to distribute my weight across the boards. Each inch foreword creates a little more excitement. I feel like a child sneaking downstairs to catch a glimpse of Santa. If she knew the lengths I was going for her, Salem would be proud. But that's a story I can tell her another time. Right now, all I need to do is sneak a peek and then make a hasty retreat.

When I reach the doorway, the only thing I perceive is the silence.

The fan isn't whirring,
the bed isn't creaking,
no breaths are being drawn.

I stand in the opening, mouth agape, peering into the shapeless void in a state of disbelief. My hand presses against the wall and touches the lightswitch. It rests there for several long seconds, as if the darkness will somehow obfuscate the truth.

tick.

t i c k
Tick

tick

As light floods the room, my heart drops deeper than the Mariana Trench. The empty white walls reflect light back toward the source. The floor, where books had been scattered haphazardly for weeks, is barren. The bed, where Salem had slept, is perfectly made. I step forward and grow more uneasy with each passing second. The room appears sterile, wiped of any trace.

The bed creaks as I lower myself onto it. My eyes dart about the room for some clue, some remnant she left behind to prove she was here. Time does not help. Even the pentagram tucked on the back of the dresser is missing.

There is a part of me that wants to cry. Another part, momentarily, wonders if it was real. Had I just imagined the entire thing? The room would sure suggest I had.

My teeth chatter as though the room is freezing. I take a deep breath in and crane my neck to stare at my left hand which is firmly pushing into the mattress. Slowly, I lift it and begin to twist at the wrist. There, in the center of my palm, is the thin scar. Laughter is all that follows. Not funny laughter. Not amused laughter. Relieved laughter. It's the only thing my body can do as it collapses back onto the bed.

I shimmy up the bed and rest my head against the pillows. I turn slightly and inhale. Even her scent is gone. In the moment, I can't help but wonder what possessed her to be so thorough. Surely, the first time, I hadn't been. Sure, when Girl Power closed I disappeared, but there were still traces. When I ran, I never thought of cleaning up before I did. I suppose there's a message there somewhere, hidden in the absence.

But I couldn't think of it. Nor could I think of Bree or Alexis or the Adrenaline Championship or wrestling at all. All I could wonder is how long it would take to mourn a second time.

March 17, 2023
8:15 PM
Tampa, Florida

The shrill voice of a flight attendant snaps me from my memory. "Now boarding Tampa to Dallas."

It disappears as quickly as it had come, an image of cortisol and dopamine and epinephrine all the same. I stand from the uncomfortable chair and stretch, and my back answers with sickening cracks. I roll my black suitcase behind me as I join the line to sit for another three hours on the way to Retribution.

But that's what we do, isn't it? Stand up to sit back down and repeat the process until we die. Sure, it is a pretty basic observation, but we can always extend it outward. Sometimes, stopping is the only way we can move forward.

But we always do.
Move forward.

March 17, 2023
2:00 PM

Tampa, Florida

The afternoon sun pummels the asphalt, causing heat to rise in visual waves. Against the backdrop of a sea of parked cars stands Datura, dressed in a pair of black skinny jeans which are torn on the thighs and knees and a black Bree Lancaster shirt, staring forlorn into the distance.

“You know, I am relieved that Supreme Championship Wrestling has a resident psychology major on its roster. Otherwise, I do not know how I would sort out all of my problems...” she trails off, refusing to meet the camera’s gaze. Her lip trembles as she peers forward, but the camera does not meet her target.

“James?” The question escapes Elizabeth’s lips as if a plea. Her face softens but does not lose its devastated countenance. “I am so proud of you.” A tear collects in the corner of her eye before running down her cheek.

“It takes a lot of courage to fundamentally change as a human being, to look at something you think you need and say ‘this is negatively affecting my life.’ You hinted at this several weeks ago, but I am someone who deeply understands the dichotomy of necessity versus well-being.” Datura chuckles.

“I do not speak in whispers about my past. It informs me today. I have learned much from my experiences, how did you phrase it, ‘popping pills due to this and that’?” She tilts her head. “I’m not mad you brought it up. Disappointed. But not mad.” Her hand retreats behind her neck. It clings there.

“There is so much I need to tell you. So much I need to say. But it’s so hard to articulate. Instead, let me tell you a story.” Finally, Elizabeth turns to the camera and nods. She steps forward and sits down on a yellow parking curb. As she does, the scene shifts. Behind her stands a white and beige building. She clasps her hands together.

“I can tell you it was summer. I only know this because my boyfriend at the time was off during the summer. I miss him. C’est la vie. One night, things got... bad. I won’t go into too much detail, it will be unnecessarily triggering. Suffice to say my boyfriend drove me to Tampa General Hospital thinking that would be best.” She grimaces.

“Little did he know, but Tampa General isn’t equipped to deal with, well. People like me. Instead, several IV bags and one terrified nurse later, I ended up here in the back of a police car. I spent seven excruciating days wandering the halls of this place, and it isn’t pleasant to think about...” Datura trails off, shifting her jaw. The joint pops. She closes her eyes and lowers her head.

“What’s the point of this little story? The point is—” Elizabeth raises her head. Her eyes hint toward rage. “I know, James. I know.”

“Nothing you have said is new information. Frankly, the fact you believe this is some kind of great revelation is a bit unsettling, but that’s the problem with people like *us*, isn’t it, James? We tend to stumble upon answers everyone else already has.”

“Let us take the experiment you subjected me to several weeks ago as one of many examples. I am sure you remember it fondly, the moment my hands were restricted behind my back. What was the purpose of that again?” She looks up to the sky and pretends to rack her memory. “Ah, yes. The lesson that college course taught you, that I am a danger to myself, and I needed to be restrained to see that.” Datura chuckles.

“I hate to tell you, but that little lesson did not have the intended effect. Do you know why I was so angry? So feral? Perhaps your little escapade into the psychiatric wars taught you meaningful life lessons, but mine did not. I have been there, Mister Evans.”

“Your methods are outdated. Significantly. The literature clearly shows that forcible detainment, as a method of harm-reduction, is not only painfully ineffective, but increases the risk of harm. Perhaps you should have finished that psychology degree. Or...”

“Or, I think the fact you mentioned that psychology degree you never received is, but a smokescreen to hide your true intentions.” She smirks, licking her lips.

“Do you know what I think?

I think you know that.

I also think you know that peppering an addict with snide jabs about popping pills isn’t helpful. I also think you know that when you think someone is troubled by violence, you do not repeatedly instigate them to violence.”

“These are not things that someone who wants to help does. But then, that assumes we take you at your word, James. Some people may believe you— that you’re doing your best, that you’re simply misguided and trying your best to assist in the way you know...

“I know better.”

“We could also explore your budding interest in literary analysis. You spent a whole lot of words on my little ‘goddess of death’ poem on Twitter, James, and you made a lot of assumptions to reach your conclusion. Did it ever occur to you to ask whom the poem was referencing? Did it ever cross your mind that maybe, just maybe, you were mistaken about the context?” She pretends to pause. “Of course not. That is not your style. Instead, you build lore upon your various misconceptions and craft a beautifully tied together narrative to proselytize. What names and acronyms was I referencing, James? Think!” She points to her temple. “My past opponents? My current opponents?” She rolls her eyes.

“No. They are the names of my friends. The names of the places I have been. I levied upon them a particular strain of decay, so much so those relationships withered and died. What else

would I call myself but a representative of death?" She silently blinks several times as if waiting for an answer. She shakes her head.

"But that's the thing.

You truly think you have the answers.

And you truly believe this quest for the World Championship is a calling.

I pity you, James.

Because right now,

in the name of stopping senseless violence

you have inflicted more pain than any chair

any ladder. Any table.

You know, you have an interesting way of showing others compassion. I think we should explore that."