

CONSTANTS:

BREATH IN MY LUNGS

Written by

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Cineidola (2019)

DOM

I've worked at the Astuary hotel for fourteen years, the last six of which have been as the night manager. My hours are 9:00pm mountain standard time until 9:00am mountain standard time. My day consists of making sure that each and every guest is accounted for, taken care of and welcomed warmly upon arrival and wished farewell when they depart. Every room has two available keys. They're flurid and brass. We've never updated to update the locks. I keep a written log of every name that passes through here and the information related to them that I see pertinent. Their check-in and check-out times. The calls they make to their loved ones and their secret partners. The shows they watch. The pizza toppings they prefer. The khakis that they decided not to wear because they give the crotch an awkwardly defined bulge. Every detail is composed by my hand. When a guest asks me for a complimentary toothbrush because they've forgotten theres i'll feign concern. "Oh no! Is there anything else you need?" They'll initially say they're all set, as if not to bother anyone. But I already know they also need extra linen. Sheets and pillowcases especially. I saw the mess they made and I also saw the video camera in the corner. That HD 4K DSLR had a good view of everything, but not as clear as mine.

Beat.

DOM

Another thing you should now about me, and the hotel even moreso, is that hidden within the structure's walls is a tunnel system big enough for one human person to get through comfortably. That small space connects to a small self-contained room outside of each guesthouse, about as big as a closet.

(MORE)

DOM (CONT'D)

One side of each room has a glass mirror built into the walls. That mirror hangs above your bed. I can, and do, watch every single thing that you do in your room. But you're not special, I do this with every guest.

Beat.

DOM

I actually found the hidden space before I became a night manager. I was working on a late night shift with Alejandro, a Astuary lifer, and he went out for a spliff behind the parking lot. I didn't smoke at the time, but I do now. I need to mellow myself out from time to time. When you've seen some of what I have, you know? Alejandro didn't really try to hide the fact that he smoked at work because there wasn't really anyone here to give a shit anyway. I didn't care, most of the time, but on this night I was tired - more tired than usual because I had just started taking some online classes and I was picking up Alejandro's slack. So I put out the "will return shortly" sign and went looking for Alejandro.

Beat.

DOM

It was raining lightly, but the parking lot was sparse so I couldn't have imagined it would have been so difficult to find him. The drops felt nice on my skin. I walked the perimeter of the parking lot, alternating my head from one side to the other like you do at a hardware store when you're looking for a specific item. Nowhere. Where the hell was Alejandro? In the corner of the parking lot I saw lamp light flicker and a figure standing down a small incline just beyond the last parking spot. That must have been him, so I headed in that direction.

(MORE)

DOM (CONT'D)

The lamp flickered again as I approached and the figure I had seen was no longer there. I noticed for the first time, however, just at the base of the incline, a small door. Like a shelter hatch, but smaller. I lowered myself down to it and pulled at the handle. It opened with almost no difficulty. I peeked in and saw nothing, just blackness. I tried to quickly flip on the flashlight on my phone but the rain was making it too slippery to attempt with one hand. The lamp light flickered again and I could see that there was a tunnel, extended further than the light could travel and heading toward the direction of the hotel.

Beat.

DOM

And then "*what are you doing?*" I dropped the hatch lid as Alejandro scared the fucking shit out of me. He stood there in the rain, smoking the nub end of his joint. He held out his hand to me, helping me up and we walked back to the front desk together.

Beat.

DOM

Alejandro and I never talked about the tunnel. He never mentioned it and I never mentioned it. Sometimes I wondered if he didn't know what I had stumbled upon. He had to have, right? Every shift I worked with Alejandro I considered bringing it up, but then I freaked myself out. I mean, I didn't know him *that well* and I had no idea what was going on down there. And technically he was my boss when we worked together because he was the "night shift lead" and I didn't want to get in any trouble. So I never said a word. Three months later, Alejandro quit. Although, he never actually quit, he just never showed up again.

Beat.

DOM

Fast forward a few years, I guess, and I'm the proud owner of a degree in Theological Studies and Applied Scripture Principles and the night-shift manager at the Astuary Hotel. That person feels so far away now.

Beat.

DOM

Watching people in their hotel rooms started off as a curiosity. I'd only peek in every once in awhile if I wanted to satiate some weird fixation from when they checked in. For example, one of the first times I ever watched was out of simple concern. A very, very intoxicated girl came into the hotel with her boyfriend. He seemed genuine and told me she'd had too much to drink at a wedding and needed to sleep it off. I checked them into their room, waited a few minutes and threw up the "will return shortly" sign.

Beat.

DOM

Actually, I need to circle back.

Beat.

DOM

I think I need to explain how I pieced this all together. Alejandro disappearing started a chain reaction. Schedules changed and work assignments changed and suddenly I was working shifts alone on many nights. When I was alone my mind would wander. I'd think about the probability of me ending up in this job. Here, alone in the middle of the night. And on this one particular night I suddenly had the urge to see what was at the end of the tunnels.

Beat.

DOM

I went around back and found the hatch. There was no one around, so I crawled in. The tunnel is cold. It's long and narrow at first, like a corn maze. And then you get to the end and the only way to go is up. A compact, metal ladder is hidden against the smooth concrete. It takes you a few feet up, after which there's another hidden door. Through that hatch is a choose-your-own adventure of human science, with options extending out like a spider's legs.

Beat.

DOM

So, back to the drunk wedding couple. I darted around the side of the hotel as quickly as I could to get to their room window. I walked through the dark, and climbed the ladder and found their room in the hallway of voyeurism. And then I watched. I had my cell phone in hand, ready to call the police at slightest fucking misstep. I watched as he took off her clothes and laid her down on the bed. I twitched nervously. He went to the bathroom and grabbed a towel. He ran it under the water as the girl coughed, still incoherent. And then he returned to the bed and took off his jacket. He leaned over her and began to clean bits of puke out of her hair. When he was done, he pulled the covers to her chin. He propped her up on a few pillows and put a glass of water next to her bed. And then he turned on an episode of Mr. Robot, lowered the volume and opted for the goddamn closed captioning. And I was hooked. Human beings are so interesting.

Beat.

DOM

Now, I promise you that Mr. All-American was not a rarity.

(MORE)

DOM (CONT'D)

In most cases the occupants of the rooms I rented lived innocuous lives resulting in nothing more scandalous than jerking off to late night HBO. A few affairs here and there. Every once in awhile some hard drug use. People are mostly good behind closed doors. *Mostly.*

Beat.

DOM

The more I watched hotel guests, the more shame I began to feel. Dark, rooted shame. I wanted to find a way out of the Astuary and remove myself from this altogether. I started looking for jobs at local ministries or charities or shelters or anything other than here. I was met with hesitation. My guilt started to multiply like a cell, doubling and doubling and doubling again, like the structure of everything that lives. The source of my anxiety. The further removed from God I felt, the more I felt like I need to *watch*. I started to sneak into the tunnel during the day when I wasn't scheduled to work. Every experience was different. Exciting. Empty.

Beat.

DOM

And then. And then it happened. The first time I witnessed something truly unsettling. And that was the beginning of my unraveling.

DOM

It was midday. A modest snow had fallen the night before which made the roads illuminate from the sunlight bouncing off of them. I parked a few blocks away, at a local supermarket. There was no chance I was going to risk having my car seen in the parking lot. I waited until the Astuary parking lot was completely silent and I made my descent.

(MORE)

DOM (CONT'D)

I'm not sure what led me to room 37, but I felt like it was calling to me. As I peered through the back of the mirror I could see that the room was empty. I pulled up the chair that I had snuck down into the hallway and sat back, waiting for someone to enter. My skin tingled. I felt a warmth surge throughout my body. A perverse eagerness. And then a woman entered the room.

Beat.

DOM

The woman entered the room wearing jeans and a black t-shirt. Her hair was up in a bun. No makeup. Very plain. She had no luggage and no other belongings except for a nondescript shopping bag. She shut the door behind her and pulled three white candles from the bag. And then, as if she had done this sort of thing dozens of times, she methodically dragged three chairs from the room and placed them facing one another. They made a triangular shape, positioned at such an angle that when occupied you'd be able to see the other two chairs out of the corner of your eye. The girl placed a candle on each chair and then lit a match. After all three candles were lit she disrobed, standing completely nude for a few moments before sitting down with her legs crossed in the center of the organized chairs. She folded her head down into her lap like a swan. And then she was motionless.

Beat.

DOM

I stood up, muttering to myself. What was I witnessing? I felt like I should leave immediately and tell someone what I had seen. But who would believe me? And then I'd run the risk of exposing myself and the hallway.

(MORE)

DOM (CONT'D)

Plus, if I were to be completely honest with myself, I was intrigued. I wanted to see what the naked woman would do next.

Beat.

DOM

The door opened. Slowly.

DOM

Three men in black robes filtered into the dimly-lit hotel room. They sat in the wooden chairs facing one another, moving the candles to the floor in front of them. Their faces were obscured. The woman seated in the middle of them didn't move, her head still between her legs. They grasped each others hands and began to chant. Softly at first, but the volume began to rise. They spoke together, "the lull of the beast is dark and strong, truth on my lips, your breath in my lungs." Over and over they repeated this phrase. The woman began to size. I could see moisture beginning to form on her shoulders and back. She tilted her head to the ceiling, eyes closed and began to chant with them. "The lull of the beast is dark and strong, truth on my lips, your breath in my lungs." And then, well, I don't know how to properly explain what happened next. Golden embers started sparking in midair. Initially I thought they were from the candles, but I could see clearly that they manifested from nothing. The flickering light grew and started to take form. The woman started to tremble. To cry. To resist. Her body fighting to regain control of itself. My eyes began to well up as I noticed my lungs struggling to produce air. I wanted to scream, but I knew I couldn't. As the glowing light started to overcome the woman I knew I had to get the fuck out.

(MORE)

DOM (CONT'D)

I ran back through the tunnel as quickly as I could, throwing open the hatch door and rounding the corner of the hotel. The snow had started to melt as the midday sun beat down on it. I pounded on door to room 37, yelling for the men to stop. But no one came to the door. No one answered at all, in fact. I fumbled in my pocket for the master key.

Beat.

DOM

The door swung open. The room was empty. No cloaked men. No mysterious floating embers. I stumbled around the room, disoriented. I checked the bathrooms. The closet. Under the beds. No sign of anyone having been in this room.

Beat.

DOM

My alarm on my phone went off causing me to jump back. I pulled it out to see that it was somehow 8:30pm. My shift starts in thirty minutes. I walked slowly back to the hotel room door, cautiously pulling it open. The door creaked and I could see that it was night. I stared out into the empty parking lot. How was it night, already?

Beat.

DOM

The hotel's front motion sensors triggered and I walked quickly toward the front desk. I anticipated seeing the daytime crew excited to be relieved of their duties. I stopped dead in my tracks. My heart started to pulse. Leaning against the front desk was a man standing in all black. I could see his face. Uncovered.

(MORE)

DOM (CONT'D)

The man smiled and asked, "Is room 37 available?" I muttered incoherently before replying with a brusque "yes." "Good," the man replied. I walked around the desk and grabbed the keys for the room, flurid and brass. I handed them to the man, noticing that my hand was shaking. "Don't be frightened," he said. "It's good to see you." I felt like I was gasping for air. "You too. It's good to see you too... Alejandro."

Breath In My Lungs

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