

At A Loss

by Kyle G

Pure darkness. A time before the concept of time. Describing it as nothingness would be illogical as nothingness didn't yet exist. Vast, unapologetic lack of existence. Yet there he was, floating. He was simply there, without direction or understanding. Living in a universe of absence. He did not wait, because time had not been conceived. He did not want, because there wasn't a thing to want. He did not pray because praying was useless. Who would he pray to? What would he pray for? He did not think, because thinking was impossible.

"Jack," he heard in the distance. He continued floating in his universe. He couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed because the darkness felt the same either way. "Jack," he heard again, a little closer. He made no movements, took no glances. Where would he look?

"Jack." He snapped back to life. He felt heavy, burdened by the sudden gravity of earth. He felt like he had just traveled through space. But he wasn't home. His brother was looking down at him.

"Yes?" he replied. He had forgotten how much energy it took to speak. He was tired.

"Jack, are you okay? I was ringing the doorbell for 20 minutes."

Jack closed his eyes. He watched the darkness surround him again. It felt cold and refreshing. He missed being weightless. He missed the lack of emptiness. "I'm okay," he heard mouth repeat, instinctually.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure? It's only been a day."

"Yes."

Jack finally opened his eyes. They floated. Even facing his brother, they didn't see anything. There wasn't a thing to see. Not in this world, and not in space.

“We need to figure out dad's funeral arrangements.” Jack's voice was monotone, as if it wasn't sure whether it really existed. He paused for a moment; it lasted either a split second or a day. He couldn't tell. Even if he could, it wouldn't matter. Time didn't exist yet.

He was taken back in his mind to another house. He was in the living room. The house he grew up in was small, but it was safe. The hardwood floor he laid on was rigid. It was practical. He was doing his math homework, one day earlier than it was due, like always.

“Aren't you uncomfortable?” he remembered his dad asking him, night after night.

Jack grinned. “Nope! I like it here.” Math was a game to him. It was a puzzle that he wanted to solve. It was straightforward. Either his answer was right, or it was wrong. It came naturally to him. He enjoyed learning new concepts, because he knew that those concepts already existed in the world, and he was simply discovering them, like an archeologist discovering the ruins of an ancient civilization. Math was something that could be understood.

“Why don't you come out and throw the ball with me.” It was the same question his dad asked most days. But unlike most days, Jack's response today was, “okay.” Jack saw his dad's face light up with delight and a hint of surprise. “Really? Great, let's go outside.”

For Jack, putting his hand in a baseball glove was as comfortable as putting it on his foot. He dropped the ball more times than he could count, and threw it over his dad's head even more. But he never heard a complaint or a sigh. Just a smile and encouragement. “That was a good one!” his dad exclaimed when a throw happened to hit its mark. The reassurance kept him outside for over an hour. As the sun started to fall behind the earth, Jack finally realized how long they had been there. He realized his face felt worn out, not from the cold, but from smiling. It wasn't baseball that he loved.

“Are you sure you want to plan his funeral?” his brother questioned gently. “Mom and I can handle it if you...” his voice trailed off into space.

“Yes. I just need a minute.” Jack remembered his legs the moment his sentence was finished. He forced himself up, fighting against the gravity. “I’m okay,” he said, either out loud or in his head.

He found himself in the bathroom. He assumed he walked there, but he couldn't remember for certain. Staring into the mirror, he saw nothing. He wondered whether his eyes were open or closed. It didn't matter.

He heard water spilling from the facet, down the sink drain. He looked at his hand and saw it resting on the knob. He felt something that resembled déjà vu. His mind was searching for a memory that he couldn't quite find, like a nightmare that filled him with dread, long after he had forgotten what the nightmare was about. He wanted to shiver or call out, but instead he continued staring forward, seeing only darkness.

Then, he realized what his mind was searching for: the worst moment of his life. But for some reason, he couldn't remember the moment. Perhaps he was repressing it. Perhaps it was a childhood memory that slipped away. A mind is powerful enough to know when to hide the truth. He let his mind wander aimlessly. He didn't really want himself to find what he was looking for. So he continued to explore the depths, knowing he would come up empty.

The sound of untouched water flowing caught his attention again. He quickly turned the sink off. His hand floated up to his face where he touched his cheek. It was damp. A towel appeared in his hands, and he dried his face from thought. He wiped his hands off firmly and unnecessarily.

Walking back into the living room, he heard a crash. Unfazed, he continued walking until he saw his brother, looking frantic. “What was that?”

Jack didn't respond. He didn't see the need. What was there to respond to?

“What happened to your hand?” his brother asked with concern. “It's bleeding.”

Jack didn't need to look down at his hand to realize that it was. He paused as he understood what had just happened; it flooded into his

brain as if life had been on a one-minute delay. But it wasn't the pain from punching the wall that he suddenly felt. He felt the anger. It hit him unexpectedly. He hated the anger. He immediately knew he couldn't escape it. The time delay meant that he had already expelled his energy before he understood what he was feeling, which trapped the anger inside his body. It was relentless. He was exhausted.

He felt the echoes of his hand punching his brother in the face. He was twelve. His brother had taken something from him of value, though Jack couldn't remember what it was now. Maybe a toy or a piece of candy. But it didn't matter, because it wasn't about what he took. It was that he took it. Jack felt the feeling of having no recourse. The house was empty, except for the two of them. His dad had left his brother in charge. Jack couldn't argue. He was younger by three years, so he was used to feeling a little cheated.

When he realized his toy or candy was missing, he knew what had happened. He looked up at his brother, who sat on the couch with a smile on his face. Jack had never screamed before. He had never raised his voice. In fact, the only outward expressions he knew of were happiness, and faking happiness. And in this moment, he still didn't scream. He didn't frown, or shake, or cry. He stood there, with this strange energy built up in his body. His brother stood up from the couch casually. And the casualness of it was what caused the energy to explode in the form of a fist.

Jack didn't understand what had happened until later, when he was in his room. His dad was sitting on the corner of his bed, looking at him with care. With warmth. His dad wasn't angry. It was the lack of anger that caused Jack's to fade into nothing. Jack remembered crying, but he didn't know why.

"You're a good boy, Jack," his dad had told him. "Do you know that?"

Jack looked up at his dad. Seeing his eyes, Jack took a deep breath, then continued sobbing.

"I love you so much. More than you can ever know. The next time you feel that way, you come to me, okay? You can yell for me, you

can call me on the phone, you can wake me up if you need to. It doesn't matter why or what happened. But the next time you feel like that, come find me.”

Jack nodded, both in his memory and in the present. His brother stood in front of him, but had stopped looking at his bloody knuckle. He was looking Jack in the eyes, waiting for them to return. “Is your hand okay?” he asked.

“I'm okay.”

“Why don't we go back to the living room and sit down.” Jack followed, not out of intention but out of necessity; he didn't know where else to go. Sitting down, he felt unnatural, as if he had been placed there or shaped into that position by a sculptor.

His wrists suddenly went cold, like freezing metal. He could feel the handcuffs sliding on and clicking into place. They were tight, like a physical manifestation of discomfort he felt presently. He wanted to grab his own wrists to make sure they were still there, but he was frozen in place, like he was as a teenager that night. He had been caught for a petty outburst, trying to fit in with a crowd that didn't want him there.

He was devastated. Not by the fact that he was the only one that was caught, but by the thought of going home. Sitting in the back of the police car was a jail cell in itself, waiting for time to creep by when he would meet his fate. He hoped for flat tire or a car accident, anything that would delay his sentence

Standing in front of his own front door, police office behind him, he felt sick to his stomach. He dreaded the door opening. He couldn't bear the thought of looking his dad in his eyes. This moment was worse than any punishment that he created. So he prayed for the door to stay shut.

He threw up. Not in his memory, but in the present. Except nothing came out. Nor did he move, or make a noise. He threw up in his mind. He couldn't handle that thought right now; it was obscene. He didn't want to confront what had run through his mind that night. As he sat on the couch, he realized that the door would never open again.

"I don't know what to do," Jack told his brother, finally seeing him sitting there on the couch.

"About the funeral? Like I said, mom and I could..."

"No," Jack interrupted out of exasperation. "Right now. I don't know what to do right now."

"What do you mean?" His brother wanted so badly to understand.

Jack looked down at himself. He felt like an alien operating a human body for the first time. "I don't know what to do with my hands. I don't know where to put them. I don't know how to hold my legs. I don't know where they go. I don't know what to think. I haven't had a complete thought all day. Every time I start thinking of someone or something, I stop. It's not intentional. I just don't know how to finish. I think of dad, and then I'll realize a half hour later that I hadn't been thinking anything at all."

"It's okay to feel sad."

"But I don't feel sad. I don't feel happy. I don't feel anything. I think that I should feel. I think I want to feel. But I don't. And then I feel guilty for not feeling anything. And then I wonder what to do. I catch myself standing in strange places in the house because I don't know where I was going. And I try lying down, but I've forgotten how to sleep. I try eating, but I don't feel hungry. I don't know what to do."

A tear dropped from his brother's eye.

"I'm empty. No, not empty. Heavy. But not heavy either. It's like I'm floating in space, and there's nothing else there. No pain, no happiness. And I don't know how to live anymore. I don't even know if anything is real. I'm, just... at a loss."

