

Never The Twain

There's a journalist outside of my apartment door. He looks like he sweats a lot and that the salty beads mix in with dirt in his unkempt beard. He's fat in the face and fat in the belly and he knocks on my door with the anticipation of a child's Christmas.

"James Foust," he calls me by my real name. He speaks with authority but I see the nervous twitch in his eye through the peephole. He strains to look back at me through the little glass, but I lean to the side and let the light through. I can hear his heavy rasping breathing through the door, like an elderly beast feeling the thrill of its final hunt. I close my eyes and listen to my pounding heart. I listen until I hear the steps move back down the hallway and I listen until all I hear is silence. I slump down and I sit with my back to the door. I feared this day for five years but it still feels unreal.

I was Ethnoskate1488. I never had an actual show, despite all the jokes that I should start a racist skateboarding podcast (I've never skateboarded). I just sometimes showed up on other people's shows and streams, quick with a few edgy jokes and regurgitated points I cribbed from much more succinct but shyer posters. They called me Ethan for short. Podcasting was a way for me to blow off steam and despite not having touched a microphone in five years it's about to ruin my life.

Years ago the only people interested in unmasking anonymous posters and podcasters were the few journalists who received NGO money and a legion of extremely online superhero film superfans who did it for free. A lot changed in the Biden and Harris administrations and with a combination of public and private funds the Justice League changed the game. Many people were surprised that DC Comics and WarnerMedia would work with an organization whose sole aim was to dox "anyone of interest" who had supported the Trump administration or helped get him elected. We weren't surprised in the least. Their full mission statement should be framed in a museum just for its brazen banality:

"The Justice League is a catalyst for racial, sexual, gender, and religious minority justice in the United States and abroad and beyond, working in partnership with communities and businesses to dismantle white supremacy, patriarchy, and all manners and forms of kyriarchy and strengthen the intersectional movement in order to advance the human rights of all people. This necessary task is impossible without a truthful audit of the fascist element of the Trump administration toward anyone of interest. This is the moral imperative toward a more perfect union and the Justice League is proud to partner with conscious businesses and organizations committed to doing the work."

Instead of having radical liberals who weren't talking to each other because of various polyamorous and molestation dramas and the clout they wanted to horde, Justice League cut a swath through the personalities by paying for all of the information disparate actors had collected, collating it, and offering bounties for anyone who had information on personalities they wanted to know about. There was no personality, no commenter, they weren't willing to put

on blast as they were flushed with cash and people quickly became addicted to the flash target of the week once they figured out how to gamify the process. They easily bought out the people who at first bristled at this new competitor as most of them found a new home in the organization. They fundamentally found no disagreement working for a quasi-corporation with the cushier lifestyle it afforded antifascists who had struggled during the previous years' intense lockdowns.

The journalist trailing me was a particularly odious example. Everyone simply called him The Blob. This was his full-time job and he did it despite the debts it put him in and despite the money that Justice League threw at him never doing a bit of good. The devil deserves his due however and no matter what people said about his physique, his physiognomy, his life, he was relentless in the pursuit of his own satisfaction. He himself had been doxed and exposed multiple times, but no amount of shaming him about his hovel and filthy lifestyle ever dissuaded him from the satisfaction he got at getting people fired. I have friends who keep tabs on him and the sad, pathetic details of his life. It's never done anyone a bit of good.

I was shaken out of this reflection by the annoying sounds of my smartphone's notifications. It was across the apartment, charging. My body simmered in nervous anxiety at what could be on there, but I pushed myself up off the ground and walked over. It was not a long distance in my apartment, with the computer pushed to one side, the kitchen on the other, and my bathroom right next to the exit door I had rested against. I didn't need to look at the phone and I often planned ways of never looking at it without ever following through. After all, it could be my girlfriend, my mother, or my job needing me to do something. There were always a thousand reasons that I needed to stay plugged into the electric cloud.

I picked up my phone and started swiping out of all the garbage. Game notifications, special offers. There was an AMBER alert I paid no attention to as it was almost certainly a custody issue. I saw a story about Trump, teasing that maybe his daughter Ivanka could run in his place and become the first legitimately elected female president of the United States. Swipe. Swipe. Swipe swipe swipe swipe. I just wanted it all gone. There were three missed calls and two texts accompanying two of those calls. The first was from my uncle. No text. The other two were from a guy from the same political milieu who knew who I was and the other was from Katie, my girlfriend. My buddy's text said "bro, call me". Katie's notification said "we need to talk."

I knew who to call first.

I went to the kitchen to fix a snack while the phone rang. Eventually the voice of Derek, formerly, Resaxotianary, came on the speaker. I chopped carrots and boiled water as he spoke.

"Hey. Sup."

"The Blob found me."

"Wow, that sucks. Do you need anything or any help?"

"I didn't answer the door. I don't know what he knows. But like I told you before, these people will need to post everything as I'm not saying anything. I'll deny it's me even if they have audio of me saying 'I am Ethnoskate'. They get nothing."

"That's rough. Well, call me if I can do anything."

"Obviously this is not why you called me."

"Obviously this is not why I called you. Did you see the latest thing with Trump?"

My knife pressed down through the carrots, hitting the board with each slice.

"I saw something about his daughter. I don't know. It's all fake and gay and it has been for a very long time. I haven't been following it. Please tell me you aren't following it."

There was a pause. Derek replied half-laughing, half-apologetic, "well who else are we supposed to support? I get that some guys are really into Hawley, but we can't split the vote."

I set the knife down. "That's not what I'm talking about."

"You mean the whole thing about Trump teasing that maybe he won't run and he'll support his daughter instead. I mean, it's a bit of a funny troll and a way to poke at how nobody really voted for Harris, but there's no way he's serious about that. Trump is going to be the guy in 2024."

"Trump is 77 now. He's looking a lot worse for wear, this can't be anything more than a grift to keep the money rolling in."

I grabbed the sliced up carrots and dropped it into the pot of boiling water.

"They're destroying his life, man, no one asks for all that pain and trouble just for a grift. And just look at who has betrayed him and the comments he made about Netanyahu and the people who have betrayed him since the last election was stolen from him. He knows the score and he knows this is his last chance to deal with these people once and for all, otherwise it's all over for him. Guys like you just had too high expectations for him. You wanted a Hitler and that's not what he is. But he can still do a lot of good for us, at the very least by not being one of these neoliberal shills."

"I haven't done politics since 2018 and I never asked for that. God damn-" I stopped myself before I said what I wanted to say. I wanted to say 'you lost your wife and she has custody of your kid because your support and online comments led to your doxing, stop making excuses for a conman'. I couldn't. I'll take whatever friends I can get these days. "Sorry, I'm just tired of hearing stuff like that when that's just not true. You tell me what the benchmarks are for Trump to be good for the cause or the movement or whatever, and I'll point to where he's failed and

failed time and time again. It's just how it is and not being President Harris isn't enough for me to care. Aren't there any groups or chats you can discuss this in?" I asked, somewhat exasperated as I tossed the block of ramen noodles into the boiling water.

"Which? Can you name me one? They're all gone Ethan and none of the new ones are trustworthy. I'm not discussing this with anyone who didn't go through what we went through."

Then why do you keep hoping.

"At least promise me that if for some reason Ivanka gets the nomination, you won't support her."

Another pause. This time it was longer.

"We have to buy time, and the Trump name is useful."

I didn't know what else to say anymore. I sighed and finally told him, "it was good to talk to you again, Derek."

"It was good to hear from you Ethan. Let me know if the Blob causes you any problems. I've lost touch with a lot of the old crew, but I could see who is still around and who I can scare up."

"Thanks, bro, but I think we're all on our own now." I poured the ramen and carrots into the bowl, keeping most of the salty broth in the pot. I applied my bit of mayonnaise and bacon bits and stirred.

"Ain't that the truth."

I sat in the silence of my apartment and ate my concoction. I didn't boil the carrots long enough and so I ate around them. I wasn't even that hungry, the stress was far too overwhelming. I looked out from my window and saw Indian children talking to each other outside. These were the bulk of my neighbors. I've lived here a couple of years and have never learned any of their names. Eventually they ran off, doing whatever it is immigrant children do with each other in this country. I looked at my phone. I had more calls I needed to make.

I decided to call my uncle on the way to Katie's. I hit the pavement of the exurb, walking out of my apartment complex and heading towards the little downtown area where she worked that looked like a cozy little town surrounded by a sea of industrial parks. I was never close with my uncle, but a few years ago I worked for him and we'd always talk politics. His instincts were good even if everything he believed was wrong.

"Uncle," I said once he picked up.

"Jim," he called me. "How's it going? What's that noise in the background?" He was referring to the zooming traffic outside as I walked the sidewalk near the road.

"It's traffic. I'm walking into town to see Katie since I don't have any work today. I'll move a little bit away from the road so that you can hear me better." I moved down into the grass that sloped down away from the road, walking beside the remnant trees that were once part of whatever massive field or wooded area this exurban area once was just a few decades ago.

"What happened to your car?" he asked with concern.

"Couldn't afford it anymore. Had to choose between that or rent."

"Call me again tomorrow, I can scrounge up some work for you if you need some part-time work."

"Sure thing, but I know that's not why you called me."

He chuckled a bit and began to draw out what he had to say like a child that had a surprise he wanted to show his parents. "What did you think about what Trump said?" It was always politics with my uncle. He knew I had supported Trump in the past, and so whenever we talked in the last three years it was about that and always that. About how the election was stolen from Trump. About the court cases that were brought against him, his family, and supporters. About the schemes to support him that came and gone; every few conversations there was always a new one. From schemes to overturn long done election results to schemes to help Trump out to schemes to help Trump take back the White House, there was always something new to put some chapened hope in. I stopped him before from throwing good money after bad and he still helps me out, the least I can do is hear him out.

"I didn't really see, what's going on?" I half-lied, I thought. I always pretended not to follow what was going on, just to hear it from him, but there were often times he knew about stuff I had never heard. Some of it was from the online group he had found, sometimes it was just because I was that checked out.

"Well, Trump is teasing supporting Ivanka running for president instead of him, but it's obvious he's just trying to bait the media. I'm not really crazy about her, I think her husband Jared caused a lot of problems, but like I said that's just not happening. He's going to run. He has to run. All of these bozos that have been making his life a living hell since he left office, I'm sure he's licking his chops waiting to go ham on them. He won't be so nice this time around."

"If they stole the election from him last time, why wouldn't they do it this time? More and more Republicans are even talking about using rules to keep him out of the primaries."

"Yeah, they can try. They'll look stupid when they try. But they can try. No, I will admit that we were a little naive in 2020, but things are different this time. You have Patriots now who are infiltrating the party and the Deep State to make sure the election is run fairly, and against

Kamala Harris Trump is going to win in an absolute blowout. Pretty sure that New York will be in play because of how bad that state has gotten.”

I wasn't sure what to say at first. My uncle was a good man but my family tells me all he talks about now is this, all he watches is the new “independent” news sources that have popped up in the last two years. There's always plans and theories as to what's going on, but the new administration just keeps rolling on with what they're doing. Life just keeps getting harder.

Sensing my silence he filled the air. “Trust the Plan, Jim. *Be the Plan*. That's all we can do. That's all we can be. Patriots are in place. We're going to get those bastards this time.”

“You're not doing anything with them, are you?” I asked, worried that he was operating in some kind of fed-monitored online group now. I pressed him further. “You aren't in any of those QAnon groups or off-shoots are you?” While they were mostly harmless, enough of the splinter groups had been rolled up on fears of shootings from some of the members. I wasn't sure what to believe about that as I don't trust the government to identify an actual terrorist.

“No need. Just enjoy the show. But I will admit that if things get too hard for me, if I get something terminal, I wonder about who I should just go and take out.”

“Yeah, well, let's not talk about that on the phone as I'm pretty sure someone is monitoring us.”

“I hear that, I hear that. Well, thanks for calling me back, I was just curious what you thought.”

“I guess we'll just need to wait and see.”

I hung up the call. I was tired of politics. I was tired of politics five years ago when it became apparent what a dog and pony show it all was. I remember what it was like being constantly sick, being constantly made sick by being plugged into the media cycle. Despite being aware of how it all worked and how the stories were crafted and how Trump played upon that cycle, I could never get enough of it. There was always something to hope for and debate, to argue about and lose friends over. As far as I was concerned I got out in just time.

My feet were starting to get a bit sore as I approached the small town down the street from my exurb. I had not yet gotten used to the walking yet. I spent most of my time in that apartment. If I absolutely needed to go anywhere, I had Katie to take me there.

I like Katie. She's kind. She's pretty. She doesn't have strong opinions on anything that even men should have strong opinions on. She's just a good person. Maybe other men want more but this is all I ever wanted. She says she doesn't agree with what I believe or once believed but she's still here. She worries. I tell her not to worry. I fear I've given her reasons to worry.

The town was active as I got down onto the main street. I pulled out my mask and pulled it up to right under my nose, ready to pull it up over if any busybody started to approach. I put my

earbuds in to drown out their nose. This has become typical of life in the last four years. The lockdown never ended. Covid never went away. Anyone too loud about how fake the crisis had become quickly found problems in their employment. Society had already separated and atomized further, no one ever really talked to one another, but a person's employment would always remain the field of battle.

Despite the restrictions and despite the people eager to enforce them, how people obeyed it was always barely minimum, if at all. People were congregated together, looking into shop windows with their masks pulled down. Everyone eyeballed one another, wondering who could snitch and pulling masks up and separating if they got the wrong vibe off a person. *How do people even live like this*, I wondered. We'd gotten used to it though.

I walked in and around these small crowds as I headed for the cafe Katie worked in. I probably should have just called her, but it seemed more right to just come and see her. I had a feeling I knew what this was about and if my relationship was going to end then it wasn't going to be in some distant way, the same way it seemed like everything was ending these days. Plus I was already starting to go stir-crazy in that apartment, I would take any opportunity to get out of there.

When I arrived at the cafe, the Blob was sitting there. I should have known. His eyes look even beadier now that I was seeing them this close. If you looked at his photo on his social media accounts, there always seemed to be something off about it. Something unreflective, like a shapeshifting vampire. Whatever photo he used took off fifty pounds and seeing him much closer he almost seemed to be bursting out of his clothes. For the first time now I noticed something that made the whole scene even more unsettling. Through his shaggy hair he was wearing some rather feminine barrettes. I recalled hearing through the grapevine that the Blob had been talking about gender *a lot*, recently. He grinned a crooked smile at me and I felt the desire to pop him well up through my blood.

He waved at me to come over to his table, knowing that I would have to pass by him anyway to get to the counter. I walked over, intending to just pass on by, but stopped to look at him. It was time for me to do what I had been preparing for since the day I knew I might be found out. I removed my earbuds and took a deep breathd.

"Hello James, or should I say Ethan, or should I say Ethnoskate?"

I stared at him without speaking a word.

"I stopped by your apartment earlier, but you weren't there."

I stared, utterly silent.

He furrowed his brow a bit, "I'm almost done with the piece I've written about you for Justice League," he gestured with his fat hands at his laptop, "though I would love it if you had a comment for me. Tell me your side of the story. I'm a journalist, I'm more than fair."

I could feel the anger well up in me, but I just stared. I stared right through him to the back wall and I could sense his discomfort that I was looking past him. He glanced his eyes around, slightly confused. He smirked.

"Don't you want to know how I found you?"

Nothing. I gave him nothing. I would give him nothing. Absolutely nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.

Someone tried to get around us. He seemed to be confused as to what was going on. He covered his coffee with the top of his hand as he scooted past me. The Blob's eyes tracked the man who was moving past and then returned to me, realizing that my gaze had never wavered. I left no expression but eyes that burned through his own small-soul.

Now he seemed agitated. He balled one hand up into a fist, and then tried the fake pleasantries once more. "Would you like to hear what Katie said? She had some very interesting things to say. You'll probably want to hear them before you talk to her, it might prepare you for it."

I continued to stare at him. He took a deep sigh and looked back at his laptop as though he were reading something. He glanced back at me, then back at the laptop. It was clear he wasn't really sure what to do. I continued to stand there, making it as uncomfortable as possible with the blank slate on my face. I might've stood there for ten more minutes if I didn't hear the voice of Katie calling to me from the counter. I slowly turned toward her and walked away, leaving my back to the Blob and never turning back.

I approached Katie, trying to shake the experience of seeing the Blob here off my shoulders. She bent slightly to the side, probably to look at him. I raised my head and looked at her with softer eyes. I saw her purse her lip as she took stock of me. She turned to another woman behind the counter and said "I'm taking my fifteen minute break." The woman nodded and Katie led me out through the cafe to the back behind the cafe.

She turned around and folded her arms once we were outside. "What's going on Jim? Are you in trouble?"

"Probably. Did you say anything to the Blob?"

"What?" She was bewildered.

"The fat guy, the journalist. What did you say to him?"

“I didn’t say anything! I did what you said if someone asks about you and just told him no comment. He kept trying to play your stupid podcast to me and asking if I recognized your voice but I told him he needed to order something or get out of line. Then he tried to arrange a time we could talk after work. I had Big Tom make him order but he left. Then he came back and he’s been sitting there for about an hour or so. Why, did he tell you I said something?”

I slumped against the wall of the building and let out a breath of air. “Yes, basically. I think he was just trying to confirm my voice for himself. Someone else who got doxed by him said he does stuff like that, pretends to have more information than he actually does. He might still publish or submit what he has anyway, especially if other people confirmed for him, but we’ll just have to keep denying and operating like we don’t know what they’re talking about.”

She rubbed her temples. “Jim, this is a level of paranoia I don’t think I’m ready to live with.”

“There’s nothing to be paranoid about anymore. He publishes what he thinks he’s got, we just ignore it. We deny everything. Let them prove I’ve done anything. That life is far behind me and I’m never going to acknowledge it to them.”

She looked like she was on the verge of tears. “You aren’t still doing that dumb podcast, are you? Don’t lie to me.”

I looked at her a bit confused. “Katie, I haven’t had a microphone since before I met you. They’re just chasing the high of being able to dox internet edgelords and combing through the archive of anything they think is notable enough. I’m a nobody. Just a white guy who wants to live a normal life with the woman I love.”

She pursed her lip again as a tear ran down her cheek. She rubbed her face with her hands and snorted. She walked over to me and just put her arms around. She rested her head against my chest and sniffled. She squeezed. I put my arms around her and just held her. She felt very warm. It felt very nice. I liked this more than everything I thought had mattered five years ago.

She looked up at me, her face beat red and embarrassed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

It took her a moment to bring herself to answer. My heart stopped until she said it. “I spit in his coffee.” I burst out laughing. “I shouldn’t have done that, it was wrong but I couldn’t stand to hear the things he said about you.” I squeezed her tighter.

“James.”

“Yes?”

“Is there a future for us? It’s not going to be like this forever, will it? I don’t just mean the paranoia about our lives being ruined because you did something stupid on the internet because of Trump or whatever, I just mean all of this. I’m so tired. I’m so tired of it all. The last four years have been election, lockdown, and we’re back to election again. Nothing seems to change unless it’s just getting worse. We can’t keep living like this.”

“I promise you Katie, it won’t always be like this.” I couldn’t be certain that would ever be the truth, but it felt right.

We stayed in our embrace until she finally said, “we need to go back inside, my break is going to end. I’ll see you tonight?”

“Yeah, I’ll see you tonight.”

We walked back in through the backdoor and she took her spot back behind the corner. The Blob was still at the table and he nodded at me with that same sweaty face and that same crooked smile. A flicker on a television screen in the corner near the front door caught my eye. The chyron on the television read that Trump was now teasing that he’d jump into the race but make Ivanka his running mate. I sighed. More conversations with friends and family to come. More grift, more kabuki theater, more tricks and schemes. More nothing.

I started to walk past the Blob, then stopped. I looked at him again, less staring this time. I took in his shape and almost briefly felt sorry for him and the life he lived. Almost. He looked at me expectantly, like I might finally say something. I looked around at the mostly empty cafe. Those who were in had socially distanced themselves far to the other ends. I wondered if they sat as far away from him as they could on purpose. I looked back at Katie, who was back on shift and fulfilling an order. I looked at the Blob’s table and to his coffee. He had taken the lid off. He continued with that wicked smile. I opened my mouth, then spit into his coffee. Without waiting for his reaction I walked out.

I could hear him struggle to get up and I could hear him shouting angrily at me, but I walked quickly out that door without looking back again. I walked swiftly down the sidewalk and dipped down different side streets to lose him. I eventually got back on the main road and the long walk home. I walked with my shoulders broad and proud. It felt like there were no more victories in this world, but I would take that one.

I stared off into that uncertain orange sun. This was the rest of my life. Past that sun there was only darkness ahead. I welcomed it though, simply for the promise that would lie once the night was done. I thought of Katie, her warm embrace. I thought of children and their possibilities. I thought of Trump. At the end of it all, he would disappear, like he’d never been there at all. All that remained it seemed was myself.

That’ll have to do.