

It was just a book on writing, purchased from one of those used book stores during a self-proclaimed super sale for \$1.25. It was a dinged-up paperback with folded back pages and fraying edges. In other words, it was ordinary by all accounts, if not a little homely. It hitched a ride home with me, was added to the ever-growing pile of tomes on my shelf, and like many others, was promptly forgotten. And that's where it sat gathering dust until the next super sale.

When the time came for Tahlia's Book store to have another sale, I took stock of my collection. I began to seriously consider researching if I had hit minor hoarding territory yet. Perhaps I could get a book on the subject. Eventually, I decided if I read a couple novels from my last haul, I could buy a few new ones. Hoarders, I reasoned, only held onto stuff they never used.

I picked through my treasures, and I was able to knock out some chapbooks from local poets in a few hours. Feeling a false sense of confident superiority, I grabbed two thick books, as well as the writing book in question off the shelf, and I decided on what I would read in the coming week before my next book-hunt.

It did not make the cut.

There was no particular reason as to why, except for sheer laziness. The book was titled *Writing Tips and Tricks* by Diane Whieler. It didn't stand a chance against the likes of *Caved* the dystopian thriller by Sophia Marton and *Board Games from Around the World* by S.W. Kane. The deciding factor, in the end, was the fewest amount of words. With *Board Games*'s very occasional excerpts, thick black borders, and printed full color versions of board games, the choice was clear.

I barely broke past the introduction of *Board Games* when the week ended. Nonetheless, I made my way to Tahlia's with a clear conscious.

When I entered the store, I was hit with the earthy, cinnamon scent of books new and old. They were stacked by the hundreds on sturdy oak bookcases that went far back into the building. It was enough to make me dizzy.

How many billions of words sat under this roof? How many books had I read? How many would I never get the chance finish in my life time? The last thought made me sad, but I soon pushed past it. I took it all in. Everywhere I looked there was a wall of books. It made me positively giddy.

My brain hummed with anticipation. Should I prowl the shelves for good deals, or grab a new novel and set up shop in one of the store's over-stuffed chairs? It was hard to choose.

I spent most of that morning and well into the afternoon perusing the tall shelves. When I was thoroughly spent, hungry, and itching for a smoke break, I dragged my purchases to the checkout counter and walked away with a good fifteen books for \$33.57. I had to say, it was my best haul yet.

I got home, spread my spoils out on the bed, and reveled in how cultured I'd become from so many books. They soon joined the jumble on my bookcase and began gathering their own layer of dust.

It was a few months before I even picked up *Tips and Tricks* again with the intention of reading it. Sorry Ms. Whieler, but I had things I had to do at the time, and I definitely didn't have room in my schedule to write. Eventually I caught the writing bug, and I peeled the book from its dust encrusted corner.

Diane Whieler, I soon found out, was prone to regurgitating the same writing advice most writers dole out. Write unashamed, write often, and don't read too many books on writing. I couldn't blame her though. There are only so many ways you can tell a person that most writers are just wandering around life with constant imposter syndrome and that thinking too much about it will ultimately drive you insane.

It wasn't a bad book. In fact, it was kind of entertaining in that self-congratulatory, recounting old woes timeline most writing books follow today. If nothing else, it would tell me to not give up on my dreams! Exclamation mark! And if I got really, really lucky, I would find a single nugget of information that resonated with me.

As decent as the book was, it wasn't the easiest read. I would get through a few pages at a time, put it down, do some writing and come back to it a couple days later. Needless to say, I wasn't in a hurry to finish it.

Then came that one night.

For some reason, I got into a good rhythm with the book. I don't know if I was more focused or if I was just procrastinating on writing that night or what. I got another forty-seven pages into *Tips and Tricks* when I finally came to myself.

I looked around the room feeling disoriented. The room felt heavy and I was starting to feel queasy. I couldn't put my finger on why I was suddenly feeling so odd, I just knew something had changed. Slowly, I shook my head, and I tried to focus on reading some more.

After several attempts of reading the same paragraph over and over again and glancing around the room, I gave up. I figured I had made enough progress with the book that night and decided to play some videogames. As soon as I put the book down, I began to feel better. After an hour of annihilating bad guys and saving the world, I had completely forgotten about my discomfort and the book that caused it altogether.

The book lay next to my bed for a few weeks. I would pick it up, begin to read it, get stuck a few sentences down and put it away. It was like there as a lead weight that kept me from continuing to the next page.

Within time, *Tips and Tricks* ended up on my nightstand where all my good intentions went to die. Surely, I thought, it would keep my retainer, makeup, and last-year's planner company. It

was then when I moved onto a different book and promptly forgot about anything that wasn't Gothic Architecture.

A handful of weeks went by without incident until one day, as I hopped from my bed, my maxi dress caught the corner of *Tips and Tricks*, causing the book to tumble off its perch.

I looked at it, surprised. I had long ago stopped regarding it as an actual book and began to think of it as just another fixture on my bedside table. I hadn't planned on reading it, honestly. It just fell open, face down, splayed out on the floor. I only picked it up to survey the damage.

Only one of the pages had gotten bent in the transition from table to floor. Not bad at all bad. I turned the page to fix it.

It was THE page. The next page. After all those weeks, I finally got to see what was there. I scanned the page. There was nothing about it that stood out. Nothing at all. I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't know why I had felt so unnerved before.

I laughed at myself and my silliness as I turned another page. More words. What did I expect?

And then I turned another. And another. The feeling of unease returned. Each page I turned I felt my flight or fight sense kick up another notch.

I ran my hand through my hair. What the hell was wrong with me? I was never the type to get worked up over nothing, but here I was out of breath and shaking as I turned the pages to a textbook. It was insane.

I turned the page. And another. And another. My teeth started to chatter as I kept turning, my breathing came in gasps, and the pages started to soak up the moisture from my sweating palms. I turned and turned and turned and turned and turned and then, on page 89 I stopped.

Page 89 was a little less than halfway through the book and it was almost like every other page. Almost. Except for one minor printing mistake. It was a little black dot. Some ink splattered in the margin, almost hidden by how the pages met in the middle. Nothing more.

The unease was gone, and I was left clutching my book in an unexplainable buckling grip.

I closed the book and continued on with my day.

Two days later I took my Gothic Architecture book down to a coffee shop. I was feeling a caramel ice-blended drink and dammit, I was going to get it. Delicious coffee in hand, I cracked open my book and continued with my reading. I had left off on flying buttresses. I laughed at myself and couldn't help but remember that just a week prior I had thought they were the round stain glass windows in churches. Stupid, I thought. I still had so much to learn.

I smiled as I finished the page and turned to the next. A ripple of cold shot up by spine. There, in the margin, where the pages melded together was a little black dot.

I stopped dead. What the hell? Another printing error? There was no way. What were the chances?

I looked closer at the spot. It did look like the one in *Tips and Tricks*. Malformed and drippy. But without looking at it for reference I couldn't be sure.

I looked around hastily and took stock of the people around me. I wanted to leave and compare the books immediately, but I felt self-conscious about leaving the café so soon after I sat down. So, I continued reading for a bit. Or at least, I tried to read as I was now acutely aware of how bustling the café was.

After the appropriate amount of time, I gathered my things, dumped my mostly full coffee into the trash and, with a calm I did not inwardly feel, walked outside.

I made my way home carefully as I sucked the life from my cigarettes. Slowly, like a criminal to execution, I entered my apartment, took off my shoes, and made my way to my bedroom. As soon as I was in sight of my night table my composure dropped. I launched myself at the book and tore it open.

What page was it? Where had it been? I flipped through the pages and right there. On page 89 was the same black splotch. As I knew it would be.

With shaking hands, I dragged my architecture book over to the writing book to compare. Sure enough, they were the same spots.

It couldn't be, I reasoned. There was no way. I flipped to the information page in the front to see if perhaps they were made by the same company. No dice. Separate companies, separate editions, and separate years. But how?

I flipped back to the pages with the dots on them. They were definitely the same. No doubt about it. I looked at the spots closely, really observing them, searching for clues. The only information I could glean from looking at the dots was that they were one-fourth the size of a dime and perfectly round except for the left most and bottom right portions. The left part of the dot looked like it had collapsed in on its self, as if someone bashed it in with a baseball bat. The bottom right of the spot looked like it was spraying blood from the impact.

I tried to stomp out my rising panic and paranoia by pulling out my computer. Maybe there was something online about this. There was no way I was being followed by a dot.

Thirty minutes of frantic searching later, I gave up. Whether the abandonment of my search was because of the blurring of my vision due to tears or because of the lack of information on little black ink spots was undecided. Regardless, I came to the conclusion that it was a coincidence. I needed it to be a coincidence. Maybe, I thought, whatever malfunctioned while printing the books had the capacity to make the same marks. And maybe that's why they had gotten offloaded to a secondhand bookstore. They were defective.

I put both books away and didn't touch another one until the middle of the next week.

I was hanging with some friends before the holiday season when the subject got onto games. We were deciding between our normal slew of Cards Against Humanity, Catan, Monopoly and so on. When Jaeda spoke up.

"I'm not really feeling it. We play them all the time. I'm getting kind of bored of them."

"Excuse me royalty. Sorry my games aren't good enough."

They rolled their eyes at me.

Liz piped up "Eh, she's right, ya know. What else ya got?"

I thumbed my matchbook, anxious for my tobacco fix. I had gotten distracted catching up with them that I didn't take my five o'clock smoke break.

"Hm." My want for a smoke clogged my brain.

"Jeez go ahead and smoke. You're like a twitchy addict."

"Nah, nah gimme a minute. Besides I don't want to yellow my books."

"But yellowing your insides is fine?"

"Let me pick my poison dammit. You ain't my mom." I scoffed

They rolled their eyes and lazed on the bed.

Time to smoke ringed my body. Come on come on. What did I have besides an overabundance of books? The lightbulb went on.

"Oh! I have a book on a bunch of board games from around the world."

"That could work." they said letting me off the hook.

I bounded to get the book "Here it is!"

"Alright, alright! Go ahead. We got it covered from here."

Needing no further prompting, I was out the door in seconds.

When I had finished up, I made it back to the room. They had made their selves comfortable by raided my fridge.

"What do we got?"

“This one here.”

“I know if you picked it, I’m definitely not going to want to play it.” I said

“Oh, are you scared you’re going to lose?”

“No, I just...” My heartbeat doubled as my past two experiences with books slammed to the front of my consciousness.

“Wow girl, I was just kidding.” Liz looked at my pale face

“What?” I snapped to as I looked down at the page with trepidation.

There was...nothing. Nothing but the board game. I exhaled my unease.

I took a look at it again. They were definitely going to kick my ass. The game was purely strategy.

“Is this fine?” Liz prompted.

“Ya. Yes, of course. Come on, let’s get it set up.”

We continued on late into the night. I didn’t win a single game.

That night I had a nightmare about the torturous dots. I was in front of a mirror in the dream. As I looked at my reflection I became severely uneasy. I knew there was something wrong with the looking glass me, but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. I stepped up closer to the mirror and looked into my own eyes.

The eyes had it. In my irises were flecks of darkness. As I stared at them the black specks started to grow in size leeching into the rest of my eyeballs. I clawed at my face, but couldn’t stop the darkness’s advance. The black took over my eyes and began dripping down my face.

From that night onward, I continued to have night terrors regarding little black dots.

Days went by unnoticed as the holidays quickly approached. I was constantly overworked at my job and busy with family in my downtime, that I didn’t have the energy to ponder over what had been happening to my once beloved books. It wasn’t until Liz handed me a gift card for Tahlia’s that I even realized I had started avoiding them altogether.

When the next super sale came around. I looked at the bookshelf that used to bring me such joy before and sighed. What was I doing? Afraid of a dot. I was being silly.

I scanned my bookcase. Looking for my salvation. Something to pull me out of my self-imposed book ban.

My eyes landed on the game book. Yes, of course! I was overreacting because of my dreams. I knew there was no dot in this book. I had seen it, or lack of it when my friends were over. However, even with that knowledge, I had not touched a single book since that night.

I opened the book slowly, as if it were going to bite me and flipped to the page we had used during the game night. I stopped breathing as I looked down.

Nothing. It was as pristine as that day. I started to laugh. My books were saved! I wiped away a tear forming at the corner of my eye. I was so relieved. I could read again and I wouldn't have to miss the next super sale. Everything could finally go back to normal. The tension from my shoulders seeped away.

As I relaxed my grip on the book the overhead light caught the shine on the glossy page and my smile wavered. In the thick black border was a discoloration. An imperfection. A smudge. A glitch in printing or perhaps a pen exploded on the page. No.

I angled the book knowing what I would find but willing it away. There inside the border was an inkblot. Just like the others. This one, however, was bigger.

Nononononono!

I quickly gathered the other black dot books and laid them out open on my bed. I scanned the books. It was growing. It was following me and it was growing. With dawning horror, I swiveled my gaze to my bookshelf. I slowly took a chapbook I had previously read from its dusty spot. I let it fall open.

There on the page, like a death sentence was the tiny decrepit dot.

“No.” I breathed. It had me. “No!”

Why was this happening to me? What had I done? My vision started to burn to black as my brain ran short on oxygen. I gasped, trying to fill my lungs, but every breath was labored. I started to hyperventilate as the panic pushed through. I pulled more books from the bookcase. There's had to be one book that hadn't been infected!

One black dot, two black dots, three, four, and more.

I began to lose it. My breathing hitched up and entered full out panic mode.

I started ripping books from the shelves en masse. A smattering of spots greeted me. Beckoning me. Taunting me. I crumbled paperbacks in my hand and heaved them across the room. I wouldn't give in to them. More books followed.

Black dot black dot black dot's been shot.

Each book I peeled apart had the same birth mark on it. I dropped them at my feet, creating a pile of spotted books.

I smacked my face, trying to get a hold on my panic. There had to be a book that was safe! My eyes landed on a Bible. Ding. That could work. I had gotten in for cheap forever and a half ago, when I planned to see what all the religious hubbub was all about.

I tore it open and looked at a page. A screech raked through my body. I tore the cover off the book, and I chucked it spot side down at the wall across from me. The book hit, dragged down the wall, and settled on the ground. A black smudge was left on the wall

The black at the corners of my vision took over as I stared at the streak. My vision grew dark as I slipped into unconsciousness.

When I woke the sun was setting, casting a spotlight on the mass that began growing on my wall. The smear had spider-webbed outward as I slept. I stared at it. I stared so long my seeing blurred. I definitely needed a smoke.

As the sun went down the black twitched and continued to grow in creeping surges. It seeped down the wall slowly. Ever so slowly as to be almost imperceptible.

I couldn't look away. It wasn't possible. After so many weeks of trying to avoid it, I gave in. I was tired. It had won.

The thing consumed my wall, spreading like oil in water. When it had decided it had grown enough, it began to bulge from the center. It started with a bubble and quiver and started to bend to the ground.

It hit the ground with a viscous shlop.

I sat with my back to the door and watched it. That darkness emerging. Gelatinously jerking to life. The terror inside me peaked as I watched it pull itself to its full height. The primordial ooze of its body looked at me. Into me. Through me. Cocked its head as the slick sheen of its body glittered with dark eddies hypnotized me. Making my brain foggy.

It whispered to me in its unknown language. Beckoning me to it. I was so tired. It could be over. It had me.

The monkey brain inside me began to fight against it. Angering it. It pulsed with rage as the need increased in me.

I took out my matchbook. My cigarette could wait.

The firefighters asked me questions after they put out the fire. My apartment was mostly okay except for my room. Good. I thought as I stepped inside. It was charred black. A good black. Earthy and pure. \

I'm sure they had their suspicions, but I would just have to deal with that bridge when I crossed it. They soon left me.

Thankfully, Jaeda put me up for the night as I figured out what I was going to do next. I was grateful I wouldn't have to spend the night alone after seeing that thing.

Jaeda came to check on me. "You okay?"

"Ya, I'm fine, just--a little shaken up."

"I bet. What...happened?"

"I don't know. I fell asleep and just nothing."

"Jesus! You could have died. Did you fall asleep smoking or something? If you did, I swear I'm going to kick your ass."

"No. No. Nothing like that."

"Okay." She softened "I'm really sorry about what happened."

"It's okay."

A silence hung in the air.

"I know..." Jaeda started "I know it doesn't make up for what you lost, but I got you something."

I looked up questioningly as Jaeda scurried to her room and back. She carried a small item behind her back.

"It's to start again." Jaeda revealed one of her favorite books from behind her back.

A cold sweat broke out across my lip.

"Jaeda! That's your favorite! I couldn't."

"Please, please just take it. It's fine, really it is. It's nowhere near what you...what we could have lost today."

I nodded and thanked her.

When the house got quiet and I could stand it no longer, I took the book out. I stroked the cover. It was a poetry book titled *A Sometime It Happened*. Jaeda's prized possession and a trophy of my triumph.

I breathed in deeply, as I opened it up, readying myself for the start to my new life.

There on the page was another black dot.