

Read an excerpt from

# **NEGATIVE SPACE**



**B.R. YEAGER**

**APOCALYPSE PARTY**

# TWELVE

## **JILL**

I split my face down the middle with red greasepaint. Rubbed liquid latex between my fingers and pressed wounds into my skin. Blackened my eyes. I looked in the mirror and a dead girl stared back. I smiled and she smiled too.

I asked Mom if she could drop me downtown. “What’s downtown?” she said.

“I’m hanging out with Cindy.”

“And Tyler?”

“Yeah, and Tyler.”

“Okay, sure. Just remember you’ve got school tomorrow.” She pointed at my face. “You look great though.”

We got in the truck and wound through the Shallows. The sky in stagnant grey twilight. A boy in a skeleton onesie tore through humps of dead leaves on his bike. The neighbors lit their jack o’ lanterns and flipped on strobes behind their windows. A flash of woods and wasps and long, scaly strings slipped between me and the world, but I shook it away.

## **AHMIR**

I told Mom I was meeting up with Tyler. “You aren’t getting into trouble, right?” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. I’m not stupid. When I was your age I was lighting cabbages on folks’ doorsteps.”

“You lit cabbages on people’s doorsteps?”

“And whatever you kids do now I’m sure it’s worse, so take your sister with you.”

“What? Why?”

“To keep you honest.” But the truth was that Tasha didn’t really have any friends to go out with.

“Whatever. This sucks.”

We got outside and I told Tasha I’d ruin her life if she told Mom anything. “Like what?” she said.

“Like anything. Just say we hung out and it was cool.”

“I didn’t even want to come out anyway.”

“Then why the hell did you dress up?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Want to see something funny?” I said. I took out my phone, looked up a video of a guy jumping in front of a subway train. She leaned in and I hit play, and her face slowly twisted into something different. She turned away and whispered, “Fuck you.”

## **LU**

Halloween had fourteen suicides. Matthew Schaefer. Thomas Kwan. Nathan Trejo. Natalie Packer and Sammy Barker hanged themselves from their apartment windows downtown. Travis Hartnett threw himself over the Lily Williams Bridge. Colby Watt walked into traffic. Jeff Eckert set his house ablaze, burning himself, his girlfriend, their baby and their cats alive. Michelle Lam’s note read I’M SO FAR AWAY. John Foster’s read LEARNING

TO SURF. Henry Adler's: I CAN'T. Marko Allen, Pauline Smelz and Zackariah Schwimmerman each shot themselves through the throat and left nothing behind.

Downstairs, Mom and Dad handed candy to children dressed in sheets, bones and pointed hats.

## **JILL**

Plump, gunmetal Dobsonflies swarmed the lights of the Getty Mart pumps. Cindy sucked on a slushy, leaning on the shop's plate glass, dressed in dark green coveralls, her face painted black and white like a clown's. I prayed she had cigarettes.

"Be home by twelve, okay?" Mom said.

Cindy skipped up to the car, her hair bobbing in tight, arbitrary braids. "Hey Mrs. T."

"Hi, Cindy. You make sure she's back before twelve."

"Can do." She winked at me. "You look great."

"Bye, Mom." I slammed the door shut. "Nah, you look great." I asked what Kennedy was doing tonight.

She made a face. "She's with Bob. Where's Tyler?"

"He's meeting us later." I hadn't heard from him all day. "Maybe we can swing by his place?"

"Sure, whatever." She pulled a bottle of Dr. Pepper out of her pocket and handed it to me. "It's got vodka. Is Ahmir coming too?"

I took a swig, tried not to gag and handed it back. "I don't know."

"Wait, is that him?"

She pointed across the street. Ahmir stood, just dressed as himself, with his sister by his side, wearing a fake corset and a

cheap witch's hat. Maybe Tyler was around, too. We ran across the street. He caught a look at us, then pretended like he didn't, but we were already right on top of him. I introduced Cindy. Ahmir just said, "Yo."

"I'm Tasha," Ahmir's sister said. "I like your makeup."

"Thanks," Cindy said. She smiled at Ahmir. "What are you supposed to be?"

"A fucking asshole."

"Don't be a dick," Tasha said.

Ahmir slapped the hat off her head. "It's Halloween. I can be whatever I want. Where's Tyler?"

"We thought he was with you."

"Nah."

"I'll text him again."

Ahmir took out his phone and started tapping on it. "I'll do it."

Tyler got back to me first. "He says we should come over. His mom's gone."

"Yeah, I knew that," Ahmir said. He spat, but his phlegm was too thick, and it slopped down his lip and onto his shoe.

We started on over, past the storefronts covered in bat decals, crying children dressed as zombies, bodies hanging from lampposts, stuffed with hay or something else. The vodka twisted in my stomach and the air was moist and pungent.

## **AHMIR**

I knocked on the door. I texted him. No answer.

"Should we just go in?" Jill asked.

"No way." A flash of Tyler's mom's fist wrapped around her pistol. I rang the doorbell.

## NEGATIVE SPACE

Footsteps thumped from inside. The doorknob twisted open. Tyler's mom stood there in her pajamas and bathrobe. A blur of mascara down each cheek. Eyes in shock. She looked right through me. "Tyler," she yelled. "Your friends are here."

Tyler's voice called back from inside. "Let them in."

"He's in the living room." She kept her gaze low and off to the side, away from any of us. She stepped aside and we entered.

It was like someone had pumped a smoke machine into the living room. Grey wisps blooming in stagnant air. Tyler crouched on the couch, two half-smoked cigarettes between his knuckles, eyes fixed on the TV, like a lion hunting antelope. The screen showed a woman being sawed in half. His eyes flicked toward us and he smiled. "Hey." He picked up the bowl from the table, took a hit and handed it toward us.

"Yo, how about downstairs?" I said, tilting my head at Tasha.

"Yeah, whatever."

We all started heading for the stairs, Tasha following behind. I crouched down to her height and pointed back at the couch. "No, you stay up here. Watch the movie." On the screen, a black-faced goblin flossed intestines through its teeth.

"I know what you're doing," she said.

"It's not what you think. Don't be shitty."

Jill nudged her shoulder into Tasha's. "I'm staying up here too. Want to hang with me?" I wanted to bat her fat fucking face in. Me, Cindy and Tyler went down to the basement.

Tyler flipped on the light. The walls had been covered in black sharpie. A mural of V-forms, spirals with other spirals nested inside them, and curling lines like circulatory systems. The outline of a hand. Like the scrawls I'd found on the pizza box lids.

Staring at it was like looking at a strobe for too long or pressing a needle into your tear duct.

“That’s cool,” Cindy said. “What is it?”

He stood before the wall and circled a region with his index finger. “This means time is out of phase. Not necessarily in a major way—just off course. And like you can’t see it ‘cause you’re inside it.” Then he pointed to three perfect spirals, barred by arched parallel lines. “These are the snakes in the woods and grass. They sleep in the earth and wait to come up.” He smiled, rocking gently on his soles, as if he’d just told a joke. “That’s what we see when we sleep.”

Cindy leaned into my side and put her head on my shoulder.

Tyler dragged his fingers up the wall to the tracing of a hand, surrounded by eight circles. “This is my hand.” He pressed his palm into it, while his other clenched in a fist and shook at his side.

## **JILL**

We sat down on the couch. Tasha coughed hard. She reached into her bag and pulled out her inhaler.

“Oh shit, are you okay?” I said.

“Yeah. Whatever.”

“Do you want to go outside?” I stubbed out my cigarette and waved my hand. The smoke curled into spirals and whorls.

“Doesn’t matter.” She puffed on the inhaler and looked away from me.

I put my hand over hers and smiled. “Let’s go.”

As we got outside, three little boys dressed like cops climbed the walkway toward the door. “Got any candy?” the first one

shouted. The other two parroted him: “Yeah, got any candy? Got any candy?”

I said we didn’t.

“Ah buzz off, you broad,” the first boy said. The other two followed. “Yeah, ya dingy broad.” They walked back down to the sidewalk.

We sat on the step and looked at our knees and shoes. “Can I ask you something?” Tasha said.

“Sure.”

“Why are you friends with my brother?”

“Well, I’m Tyler’s girlfriend. And Ahmir is Tyler’s best friend.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Her tone made me nauseous. “What do you like to do for fun?” I said.

Before she could answer, something scraped and rustled by the side of the house. A humped silhouette rounded the corner, leaning into the siding. Tyler’s mom, hunched over, tipping a large red jug—a gas container—over the grass and foundation. She looked up and saw us. “Oh,” she said. She dropped the jug, took her keys out of her robe pocket, power-walked across the yard to the garage, got in her car and drove off.

I got up and walked over to the canister. The grass was soaked with raw woozy fumes. We went back inside. Tyler, Ahmir and Cindy were back in the living room. On the TV screen, a goblin gnawed at a woman’s bloody foot. I told Tyler about his mom—the quiver in her eyes as she wetted the foundation with gasoline. His face emptied out. “She just does stuff sometimes,” he said.

“Why don’t we go?”

“Don’t be stupid. It’s fine.” We all sat back on the couch and watched the rest of the movie.