

Oblivious

By: Domini Gee

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A walk down 38th, past the Pizza Hut, around the nearest corner, a stop in front of the mural, around the next corner and into the glare of the blinding streetlight; Cam had the route committed to memory. His watch read 12:43AM when he stopped, puzzled. He lifted a finger and traced over the dull grey wall, searching....

"Something wrong?"

"Jesus!"

Cam jumped and the stranger chuckled. Cam's face went red with embarrassment.

"Shit, sorry. I didn't see you there."

"S'okay, I have that kind of effect on people." The man looked between the wall and Cam, tilting his head curiously. "So what's up? You looked pretty zonked out."

"It's just there's supposed to be mural here," Cam said. "It's always here."

"Yeah, the city got it painted over today. Tightasses. Where people like us see art they see a great big mess. Which is why I," he put down a grey duffle bag, "plan on adorning this boring canvas."

"This late?"

"Why not? No one's going to bug me this late, save people like you. Besides, don't you think this wall deserves more than some cheap paintjob?"

"Yes. Definitely." The answer was immediate. Before Cam could say anything more his watch beeped: 1:00AM. "I gotta go."

"No worries," the man said. "I'll see you same time tomorrow?"

Cam snorted, about to say how much he doubted that, but he was already around the corner, into the bright light and gone.

~*~

The following night, Cam frowned at the wall. It was still blank.

“Hi again.”

“Ah!”

Cam jolted, instinctively turning towards a smirking face.

“Jumpy, aren’t ya? That’s twice in a row, man.”

Cam had a defensive retort ready but as the words sunk in it warped into a confused, “Twice?”

“Yeah, as in second night in a row?” No response. The man sighed. “Okay, last night. You were spaced out in front the wall just like you were tonight. I called out to you, you nearly leapt out of your skin, again, except, granted, you had better control-”

“No, wait, I got it,” Cam interrupted. As if someone had flipped a switch the previous night’s memories were back and Cam felt lamer than he already did. “Sorry, must be having a brain fart moment.”

“Meh, I’m over it. I’m used to stuff like this. By the way, I haven’t caught your name yet, have I? Or are we having a shared brain fart?”

Cam shook his head. “It’s Cam. You?”

“I have a lot of names but tonight I think I’m Seth. Give me a hand counting these bricks? Time’s tight.”

Cam caught himself in mid-nod, remembering his own time. However, his watch hadn’t beeped yet so he supposed he had some time to spare. Seth marked the dimension of the area he planned on using with blue thumb tack while Cam started the count. Seth

talked about the importance of gridding while they worked but at 1:00AM Cam's watch beeped and the numbers disappeared from his thoughts.

"I gotta go."

"Sure. See ya tomorrow."

Cam almost stopped. "Tomorrow?"

"Same place, same time," Seth said with certainty.

Cam would have argued but he had to go; he was around the corner, and into the harsh light.

~*~

On the third night, Cam's route was the same save one addition: the man standing in front of the wall.

Cam waved, and said slowly, "Seth, right?"

The man smiled. "Mort."

Cam blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Mort. I'm Mort tonight."

Cam stared. When the man showed no signs of joking, Cam snorted with a shake of his head. "Weirdo."

"One of many names," Mort said. "Anyway, give me a hand. The sooner we clean up the sooner I can put on the primer."

Mort directed his attention to one of the prepared buckets and a scrub brush and Cam fell into a steady, repetitive rhythm. Dunk, slosh, scrub, repeat. Mort's humming and chatter was a dull background noise and for a moment, Cam's world narrowed to him,

that wall, and his actions. Then he nearly bumped into Mort when he moved sections.

Cam quickly apologized but Mort just shrugged.

“Want to give me a hand with the primer too once the brick’s dry? I got an extra roller.”

Cam wanted to. He really did. Mort didn’t seem like a bad guy, a weirdo but nice. However, Cam shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Cam’s watch beeped at him. 1:00AM. “That’s why.”

Mort called out a goodbye and the promise to meet again as Cam disappeared around the corner.

~*~

The fourth night, Mort was already mixing the paint. Remembering the previous night’s conversation, Cam tested, “Mort?”

Mort tsked, looking at Cam with something akin to pitying disappointment. Cam tried again, awkwardly asking, “Who are you tonight?”

He brightened. “Now you’re catching on. Tonight, I’m Than.”

“Than?” Cam cocked his head. “What kinda name’s that?”

“Greek, and to be fair it’s an abbreviation. Anyway, to work then?”

The work was painting the background. Cam gingerly took the brush.

"You sure this is okay?"

"Why not? At this point it's partly yours anyway."

"But I don't know anything about painting."

"That's okay. All we're doing is filling in the blanks right now."

Cam made a noncommittal noise. "What are you going to paint, anyway?"

"Ah ah ah, can't tell," Than said with an admonishing shake of his head. "You'll know it when you see it. You'll feel it. That'll have to wait till tomorrow though, this layer's gonna have to dry first."

"Ah. Can I ask a question?"

"Shoot."

"Why don't you just do this during the day? You don't seem to be making much progress."

"A little bit at a time makes all the difference." Than waved dismissively. "Besides, I'm a busy guy. Places to go, people to meet, you know how it is. I'm working on a time frame, just like you."

"This late?"

"Of course, night's one of my busier times. Hell, I see a girl after you."

"Girlfriend?"

"No," Than replied forcefully. "Too young. Waaaay too young. She's a sweet kid though, says the darndest things, but she's just at that age where kids think they know the world. She rides her scooter around the apartments on 43rd, ever seen her?"

"No..." Cam's mouth settled in a troubled line. He opened it to say something, but quickly closed it.

They finished painting the background a few minutes before 1:00AM. Than continued talking amicably while Cam threw in the occasional comment and head nod. Than sighed dramatically.

"You aren't *listening* to me."

"Yes I am-"

"No, you're not. You're thinking real hard about something else. What is it?"

"Well..." Cam tapered off. "About that girl you mentioned..."

"Kelly? Yeah, what about her?"

Cam flexed his fingers in thought. He felt like he should be saying more, but at the same time he wanted to berate himself for feeling like a nosey paranoid. How old was this girl? Why did Than have to meet up with her? Why this late? Did he know enough about Than to ask about this stuff? But as soon as he opened his mouth to ask, "What is-"

His watch beeped and all thoughts and questions about Kelly faded. He shook his head at Than. "It's nothing."

It probably was. It wasn't his business anyway.

"If you say so." Than shrugged. "See you tomorrow night?"

Cam was already half-way around the corner. "Yeah, see you tomorrow."

~*~

The fifth night, the man already had the paint cans out and was looking over his sketch. Cam called out to him and the man jumped.

"Ah!"

Cam couldn't help but smirk. "Jumpy?"

"No," he said, "just thought I'd give the self-absorbed thing a try. I decided I don't like it, it's a heart attack in the waiting."

"Uh huh. So who are you tonight?"

"Mr. D."

"Seriously?"

"Many names," Mr. D reminded him.

Cam sighed in resignation. "What's up tonight?"

"Tonight, I paint. You're going to be my spotter."

"Spotter?" Cam asked. "Like, keeping an eye out for people or something?"

"No," Mr. D snorted. "I just need you to keep a close eye on what I'm painting. Tell me if any paint drips or if the image looks off."

Cam frowned. "Wouldn't it be better if I actually knew what you were painting?"

"Not really." He shut the notepad with a slap. "It's not that hard. You'll feel if it's wrong."

"If you say so," Cam muttered.

Mr. D dipped a brush into one of the many paint cans. In the dim light, bright white dribbled back into the can, and when the excess was off, Mr. D moved. The usually vocal man was unnaturally silent, but Cam wasn't sure he would be listening if he wasn't. Cam's eyes were mesmerized by the constant flow of white. The brush never stopped. Each stroke and dip, it swirled around until a circle bloomed outward enough for Cam to notice the yellowish tint.

Mr. D let out a thoughtful 'hm' but his hands kept moving. One hand kept painting, finishing up a second circle on the opposite side, while the other retrieved a thinner brush. The hands switched brushes and the new brush dipped into another can. The thin brush ringed the circles with what looked like a metallic grey, and then joined the circles with a thin, arching line. More grey lines were added in sporadic spots, framing the circles until finally, the brush stopped.

"Should this area," Mr. D pointed to the area above the vertical line, "be red or silver?"

"Red," Cam said without a second thought.

Cam assumed he must have picked the right choice; Mr. D emitted another 'hm', this one sounding pleased.

Mr. D took a larger brush and dipped into a red so dark Cam first thought it was black. Cam felt a shiver as the red filled in the black. When did the temperature drop?

The space was half-way filled when Mr. D said, "Could ya step back? I need to know how it looks at a distance."

Cam obliged.

"Further."

Cam took a few more steps back.

"Further."

Cam's heels touched the edge of the curb.

"A little to the right."

"Look," Cam said shortly, "could you just tell me exactly where to stand?"

"Oh, just beside the pole."

He sighed in exasperation, "What pole?"

"The one right beside you, the one with the flowers and the plushies and notes."

"There isn't any-"

But when Cam turned his head, he gaped at the pole that wasn't- *shouldn't* - have been there. His head whipped to Mr. D, eyes wide with accusation that his mouth couldn't

voice, as though it could somehow be Mr. D's fault. All he could get out though was a shaky, "This wasn't here before. It's *never* been here!"

"Sure it has," Mr. D said smoothly. "It's just never been relevant to you before. There's no shame in it."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Cam insisted. "I always go by here and it's never been here."

"Hey, Cam, stepping outside your revelation that 'oh my God, there's a pole here', do you know what it's for?"

Cam was taken aback. "What?"

"Tell me. Do you know what that pole's for?"

"It's..." Cam swallowed down the dryness in his throat. "It's a memorial. For traffic victims."

"True," Mr. D spoke without any of Cam's hesitation. He had turned away from the wall and abandoned his brush at that point. "Personally, I always felt like these were monuments to self-obsession."

Cam's jaw dropped. 'Self-obsession? How can you say that?' Is what Cam wanted to say. Instead, his watch screamed, informing him it was 1:00AM. He stiffened and moved towards the corner.

"You're in a hurry," Mr. D said lightly. "What's the hurry?"

"I gotta go."

Usually, Mr. D let him go with a breezy comment about seeing him the next night. This time he casually stepped in Cam's path. "Neat! You know, I don't think I've ever asked but what do you do? Are you a student? Early morning shift?"

"I just-" Cam stepped right but Mr. D matched his movement, "-gotta go."

"Where?"

"Somewhere-"

"But where? Why's it so-"

"It's just important. I have to-"

"But why-"

"Stop moving- let me go -"

Cam finally got a foot in front of Mr. D. He clipped the other man but instead of stopping to ask if he was all right or to say he would see him again he was rushing around the corner and into the bright streetlight.

~*~

On the sixth night, while still on 38th, Cam thought about taking another route.

There was no reason he couldn't. 38th, the corner, the wall, and the other corner weren't the only available streets; he could forget about whatever-his-name-is-tonight, the mural, and just go. Go up an extra street, cross the street instead of turning the corner, just go some other route.

His feet wouldn't cooperate with his thoughts. He passed the Pizza Hut and came to the corner instead of going any other direction as he intended; as though compelled by some dark force he turned left and around the corner.

The artist already had his paints out and was choosing brushes when Cam approached him. He smiled genially at Cam and Cam returned it with a less than enthusiastic nod.

"Who are you tonight?"

"I think I'm Seth again. Ready to finish this off?"

Cam nodded again, more firmly.

Seth painted and Cam watched. More grey lines were added, giving edges and unconnected surfaces. Seth would switch between red and grey, mostly red, to fill in gaps while others he left black. He absently smeared colours together with his free hand, blending them into outward running streaks. Cam exhaled a nervous breath. The previous night he could focus on the pattern of the work but tonight, his eyes kept drifting back to the pole.

"...Hey, Seth?"

"Yes, Cam? Critique?"

"The ridge on top should be taller," Cam said absently. "What did you mean yesterday? When you said that this was a monument to self-obsession? I don't get how you could say that."

"You say that like I'm blaming the victims."

"Aren't you?" The words sounded harsher aloud than when Cam thought them.

Seth sighed and shook his head. "I'm not. Well, I am, just a little but not entirely. Like I said, there's no shame in it but humans are a pretty self-absorbed lot."

Cam's eyes narrowed. "So you're saying that the accident victims died because they were too stuck on themselves?"

"If you want me to use your blunt definition of it, yeah I am. But before you blow up over it, remember that it's not just about the victims here. What if Joe Blow had been paying a little more attention while driving? Maybe he might have noticed Jane Doe before he ploughed his car into her. Or what if Jane Doe had been a little more vigilant, a

little bit quicker, maybe if she had taken her headphones out she might have noticed what was going on around her.”

Cam quickly shook his head. “Mistakes still don’t mean people are self-obsessed.”

Seth raised a brow in Cam’s direction. “Nah, you’re right, it doesn’t. But there are more examples on a whole and I can use you to prove it, if you don’t mind.”

Cam shrugged, loosely. “Go ahead.”

“Right, so basically, you have a routine every night. Every night you go down the same route, stop at the same places for about the same amount of time, and then you’re gone at the same time. Do you see other people during your walks?”

“It’s past midnight, who’s going to be out here this late?”

“I was, but you didn’t notice me until I called out to you and you forgot me the first time.”

“That was a brain fart. I remembered you just fine afterwards.”

“After I became relevant to you. Really, in all the time you’ve been out here, I’m the only person you’ve met?” Seth pressed. When Cam didn’t say anything he continued.

“What about Kelly? Remember her?”

“What about her?”

“C’mon, Cam, a grown man meeting with a younger girl past midnight and you don’t think that’s the least bit suspicious? I could have been doing anything with her and you just let the topic go by the moment your own business came up.”

Cam winced. His excuses (‘it’s not my business’ and ‘I’m being paranoid’) stabbed needles of shame into him.

"Then there was last night. Why was it you never noticed the memorial until I pointed it out to you? You never so much as looked at it before and now you can't take your eyes off it. Why's it so relevant to you now?"

"I don't know," Cam said, weakly. "Probably because I'm trying to figure out why I never saw it."

But Seth continued as though he said nothing. "And then, there's your habit of leaving every night at the exact same time. What are you rushing to? Why is that time so important to you? Have you ever stopped to think about it?"

"It just *is* okay!?"

Silence. Seth had stopped moving and Cam was too stiff to. Finally, Seth reached down and dipped a new brush into the white-yellow paint.

"I think," he said softly, "I'm almost done."

He turned back to the wall and slashed a harsh, outward streak from one of the orbs. And again. And again, letting the white splatter where it would from the stroke. The white intersected with the red and grey in wide streaks but...

"They're too narrow," Cam murmured.

Seth paused. "And?"

Cam chewed on his bottom lip. "Frame should be bigger. And there's stuff missing on the sides."

"Can you show me?"

Cam shook his head at the proffered brush. "I can't draw."

"Just give me an idea. Paint whatever you feel."

Cam looked at the brush, at Seth's patient face, and the mural he knew was missing something. He dipped his brush into the red and on the ends painted curved objects attached to small hooks. Up close, he realized that the white wasn't as bright as it should be. He mentioned this to Seth, who simply said,

"Show me."

In went Cam's brush again, this time to a brighter white. His brush still had wet red paint but the mixture made a blurring effect that just felt right. A few strokes later and he realized there still wasn't enough white. He took a bigger brush from Seth and slathered it on, all coming from the orbs and fanning out in all directions. The white overpowered the red frame and the grey outlining, filling in the remaining gaps and reached out past the designated bricks. It struck him that it didn't matter that the frame wasn't big enough; the white streaks stretched the shape on the wall until it easily towered over him.

And then the brush tumbled out of Cam's hand.

Cam stumbled backwards. The art was only passable but he could see it: the large frame of a car, the headlights, and the great bright light.

He felt a hand touch him and jumped. Seth was there, head cocked patiently, and he asked, "Who are you today?"

"I'm..."

The pieces were there, but his mind struggled to put it into words. After two false starts, he looked to the memorial and apprehensively approached. When he was close enough to touch one of the larger placards he slowly traced down the list of names until he found what he was looking for.

"I'm...Cam Ross. I'm the seventh person to die on this corner."

Like a secret password, those words flipped a switch that arranged the pieces his mind was grappling with.

"I was coming back from a party," he whispered. "I lived only a few blocks away, I could get home in less than fifteen minutes. I stopped by to look at the new mural on the wall and then my watch beeped. When I turned the corner all I could see was this light. I thought it was the street light, that thing's always been blinding, but I never...I never saw it coming."

His nails scrapped over his name, slowly tracing each letter. So many names...

"And I-I was lucky that someone remembered me."

His watch chose to beep then. 1:00AM.

Cam slowly drew away from the memorial. He looked at the mural of the car again, and then approached the corner.

"Where ya going, Cam?" Seth called.

Cam turned and smiled. "I gotta go."

And then he turned the corner for what Seth knew would be the last time.

Seth collected his paint and brushes and dumped them back into his bag. He looked at his - Cam's - work but only for a moment. He had to go; he still had to meet Kelly. So he turned and left, around the corner, and disappeared into the darkness.