

All Those Friendly People

On Fridays, we go to the park. The four of us cram into the three seats of Oliver's rusty pick-up, and he drives us away from the hormonal drama that is high school. We deposit the car in a remote parking lot near Starbucks, swing by for Frappuccinos, and trek the remaining distance on foot. We plop down on the bench vandalized with our initials, and watch people until the sun disappears over the hill.

Stressed mothers with strollers. Fat men in stuffy suits. College students with their head in their hands. Dog owners and their pooches. High schoolers waiting for a drug deal. Skateboarders too old to be skateboarding. Old ladies wearing a generous amount of makeup. For hours, we absorb these friendly strangers into our lives. Alice brings sketchbooks and makes hasty doodles of each passersby with ballpoint pens. Oliver captures them forever with shots from his polaroid camera. Katie makes up stories for strangers, giving personality and character to the passing faces.

Being that I'm less talented than my friends, I often engage with Katie in her creation of narratives. Sometimes we find a pair of strangers having a discussion beyond the fountain, and dub our own conversation over them. We're once graced with an elderly man and his adult son in the midst of a heated argument. Just as the old man angrily holds out a paper sack, Katie whispers into my ear— *This is a bag of my shit*. This quickly becomes a recurring joke in future people dubbing.

At some point, Katie begins a list of the people we see every Friday. She gives brief descriptions— bald dude with a mustache, woman with a ponytail, pajamas—and a tally of how often we see them. If a person receives five tallies, we give them a name, marking them as a recurring character in our people-watching sitcom.

We have only a handful of regulars, but Katie loves them as if she actually knows them. She often gabs about her favorite regular: a college runner who resembles Bradley Cooper, donned with a sporty headband and a t-shirt through which you can always see his nipples. She calls him Bradley Boober.

I eventually take up my own people-watching activity. Inspired by Katie's selective list-making, I start my own list of strangers who are exceptionally interesting. People you see once and then never again. People I would come to think of as cryptids.

Nobody intriguing comes to our small city in the Mideast, so the list is short. Its only members are an old blind man (included only because I've never seen a blind person before), and a woman with heterochromia. There is once a third cryptid—a middle-aged mime—but I have to cross him out when he approaches us and asks for directions.

After the sun goes down or people stop showing up—whichever comes first—we pack up and go back to the car. Oliver climbs onto the truck bed and removes a large cardboard box. Its flaps are crumpled and on the verge of dissolving, its exterior covered with an abundance of stickers and doodles. Alice passes around a sharpie, and everybody scribbles a date on their favorite piece of the night, adding it to the box. We seal it up and Oliver drops us off.

We do this for years. Alice gets a job at Starbucks. She gets us free drinks sometimes. She starts dating a junior, who joins us for a couple Fridays before getting bored and dumping Alice. She starts dating somebody else, but she doesn't invite him to our people-watching. Oliver breaks his leg during summer vacation and is hospitalized for a week. He puts on a lot of weight and grows a beard. He loses his virginity to a girl from another school. Katie starts playing softball. She gets really good at pitching and we go to all her home games. She comes out as lesbian and her parents get divorced. She doesn't talk about her mom anymore.

Time passes and I don't add anyone else to my list. I say aloud that its funny how we change while the strangers remain the same. I stop looking for cryptids, silently hoping the world would send one my way.

Senior year, it does.

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An exchange student, they say. On the surface, he looks completely average: a lanky kid with blond hair and a narrow face. He's tanned, from California, walks with his hands in his pockets, and clicks his pen in the middle of class. He introduces himself as Carson Carson, laughs, and explains that friends at his old school call him CC or Ditto.

For a while, I don't pay attention to him. He sits next to me in calculus and a few tables away in the cafeteria, but retains the same presence as any other student, which is to say, no presence at all. Unless he was talking to me, it was like he didn't exist.

A couple weeks into the fall semester, I start to notice something seriously off about Carson. I finish our assigned quiz in calculus, jotting something down for the last question—a shot in the dark guess, really. Next to me, Carson rises from his seat and turns in his quiz. I follow seconds behind, turning mine in as well. I don't think much about it in the moment. I mean, there's not much to think about turning in a quiz. But as the days go by, I begin to notice a pattern from the Californian, and I find myself fixated on his every action. He walks a little faster than everyone else. His jokes make others laugh a little harder. He's given nine tater tots instead of the usual eight.

On the day our quizzes are returned, I turn to Carson. "What'd you get?" I ask nonchalantly.

He raises his eyebrows as if unsure, and holds up his quiz. Circled in red pen at the top is 86. I gaze down at my own quiz. 85.

"What do you think of the new kid?" I ask the others at lunch.

"Carson?" Alice confirms. "He's in one of my art classes. He's fine."

"What makes you ask?" Oliver says.

"Have you guys noticed how he's—how do I even say this... It's like he's better than everybody else, luckier, but only slightly. Like, if you're not looking for it, you wouldn't notice, but it's there."

Alice, Oliver, and Katie exchange glances. I groan. I know what they're thinking.

After witnessing Juniper Fitzgerald hook up with her Spanish teacher on the steps of the park fountain, we made a rule against people-watching students from our school. It was too mentally exhausting to uncover our peers' secrets. None of us can look Juniper in the eyes without picturing what we'd seen.

"You're so desperate to add more people to that list of yours," Katie teases.

"I'm not!" I argue. "Well, okay, I *am*. But I'm serious about Carson. He's hiding something, I know it."

Oliver furrows his brow. "You shouldn't go digging around in other people's business. You know the rules. We wouldn't want another Fitzgerald situation."

I roll my eyes. "Look, just pay attention to him. That's all I'm asking." I glance at Alice. "You said you're in a class with him, right? Just watch him."

She screws up her face, but nods. "If stalking the new kid will make you happy..."

We go to the park later that day for our weekly people-watching. Alice is quiet. Only as we're packing to leave does she speak up.

"Carson *is* better than everyone else," she says, quietly at first. "But it's like you said, only slightly." Katie and Oliver stare, waiting. "In class today, after lunch. His watercolors were just a little brighter than mine, than the other students'. Even the teacher said it was weird."

"It doesn't matter," Katie groans. "He's off limits."

Alice and I aren't swayed. We start compiling a list of everything we see:

Monday. Carson gets the parking spot closest to the main entrance.

Tuesday. Carson finds five dollars in the art hallway.

Wednesday. A student drops out and Carson gets her locker as a spare.

Thursday. Carson is the last to use a drinking fountain before it stops working.

On Friday, we present the evidence once again to the non-believers. Oliver and Katie squint suspiciously at it. “You’re people-watching him, aren’t you?” Oliver says rhetorically.

“Admit it! This is weird!” Alice says, pointing viciously at the list.

“It isn’t *weird* for somebody to find five dollars, guys!” Katie interjects. “None of this is! It’s just coincidence! You’re seeing what you want to see!”

“What if we could prove it?” Everyone spins around to face me. “Today. At the park. We take him with us and you can see for yourselves.”

Alice nods her approval. Oliver scratches his face and looks at Katie. “We can take him,” he says. “But when nothing happens you two have to leave him alone. For your own good.”

We say deal and it’s done. Alice invites Carson during their shared art class, and after school, he finds us waiting at Oliver’s truck. The five of us pile into the seats—it’s a tight squeeze—and speed off to the remote parking lot. We don’t stop for coffee, and we don’t sit at our bench. We instead find seats on the steps of the fountain, Carson following behind like a lost puppy.

“So,” he says nervously. “What exactly do you guys do here?”

“Just hang out,” I say quickly. “We just sit around. Chat.”

Carson nods. “Oh, okay.”

We all begin our usual activities, but within an hour, our collective focus shifts to Carson. He sits nervously on the steps next to Alice, tapping occasionally on his phone with a bony finger. He spreads his legs out along the steps, knocking a stone out of place. I bend down and pick it up.

“Do you guys skip stones in Cali?” I ask, turning the rock over in my hand.

“Maybe? I never have. We’re more known for surfing, haha.”

I stand and peer across the fountain. “It’s easy. Watch me.” I wind up and toss the stone across the fountain. It plinks across the water—once! twice! three times!—and sinks pathetically into the pool.

“Looks fun!” our guest exclaims. Everyone studies Carson as he puts his phone in his pocket and retrieves a rock from the base of the fountain. He sidles up next to me and tosses his stone. It sails across the water four times and vanishes. I raise my eyebrows at the others.

“Oh, step aside!” Katie shouts, setting down her notebook. “You’ve never done an athletic thing in your life. Proves nothing.” She chooses a rock and pushes past me. “Watch how a softball player does it.” She winds up and throws the stone, giving an audible grunt as it leaves her grasp. It skips five times and sinks. Oliver raises her eyebrows as Katie cheers, “Beat that!”

Carson laughs. “Hang on, that was my first throw! Let me try again.” He once again picks and throws a rock. Predictably, it skips six times—once more than Katie’s.

I watch her expression of triumph turn to fear. She glances at me, and then at Oliver, who has cupped a hand over his agape mouth. Wordlessly, she tries again. Five skips. And again. Five skips. And again. Four skips. She gives up and sits back down on the stairs.

We spend the next few hours giving Carson more opportunities to prove us wrong, but he doesn’t. Oliver goes to the truck and comes back with a frisbee, which Carson throws further than Katie by a couple centimeters. We dunk our heads in the fountain and hold our breath, Oliver coming up for air just seconds before Carson. We see who can do the most push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks—Carson always coming out on top. The sun goes down over the hill, and the four of us, exhausted, sweaty, and defeated, collapse on the stairs.

Carson’s phone vibrates in his pocket, and he reaches quickly to grab it. “Oh, one second guys. I have to take this.” He runs off, pressing the phone to his ear.

Oliver shakes his head dismissively. “Okay, I admit it. It’s weird. He’s an alien or something. What do you guys want to do about it?”

“I wanna know what’s up with him,” demands Katie, arms crossed.

“Should we just... ask?” Alice offers.

It seems like a dumb idea, but no one protests. Carson returns a couple minutes later, sounding a little too energized. “I’m back! Didja miss me?” No one says anything to this. For a while, the silence is deafening.

“You know, CC,” Katie says, rising from the stairs. “The four of us were just talking about how talented you are.”

“Is this about the stone skipping thing?” he queries, eyes focusing on anything that wasn’t Katie. “That was just beginner’s luck, haha.”

“Was it beginner’s luck when you found five dollars in the hallway?” Alice challenges, standing. “The locker? The drinking fountain? Were those beginner’s luck?”

Carson’s skin goes pale. “Have... you guys been... stalking me?”

“You’re just weirdly good at stuff!” I say quickly. “We just want to know—”

He turns and runs. He sprints away from the fountain, from us, and into the encroaching darkness of the night. As if instinctively, Oliver throws himself off the steps and chases after him, and I sprint close behind. The girls follow, determined to learn the truth. Carson turns onto a nature path, ducking past a sign and vanishing into the woods. We trail him closely, the dim lights of the park becoming specks behind us. Our heels kick up gravel and we pant as we run, the only sounds audible in the pitch-black night.

Oliver throws himself at Carson, barreling into the smaller boy and knocking him to the ground. He clasps his hands onto Carson’s wrists and pins him under his weight. Carson screams.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Oliver huffs. “Why would you run from us?”

Carson continues to scream profanities, so Oliver shifts his weight and clamps a hand over Carson’s mouth, muffling his complaints.

I cross over and squat down next to the Californian. “What are you hiding?”

He muffles a response, and I look at Oliver. My friend removes his hand, and Carson says again, “I can’t tell you, but I can show you. Just let me go. Let me go and I’ll show you.”

“Get off him, Oliver,” Katie says, grabbing his arm from behind. He gets up and steps back, towering over the lanky body of Carson, who rises slowly.

He reaches into his pocket and brings out his phone. He taps repeatedly on it. “I have connections,” he whispers plainly.

“What connections could you possibly have that would make you the best at everything?”

He holds out his phone to me, and I take it. I hear it ringing. He’s dialed a number. “Would you like to find out?”

I slowly raise the phone to my ear and wait, almost afraid to breathe. I wait for what feels like an hour, the dial tone sounding like a foghorn in the quietness of the night. Eventually, the tone clicks, and I inhale anxiously. The voice on the other end isn’t human.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ALL THOSE FRIENDLY PEOPLE?”

I drop the phone. It collides with the gravel path, screen cracking in multiple places, illuminating the immediate area. I see the concerned faces of Alice, Oliver, and Katie. Carson is nowhere to be found.

They ask me who it was. They ask me what they said. I forget how to speak and nearly bite my tongue off. We go back to the fountain. We clean ourselves up. We pack up our things. We go back to the car. We don’t talk about that night. And we never see Carson again.

On Fridays, we go to the park. We plop down on the bench vandalized with our initials, and watch people until the sun disappears over the hill. This is the way it’s been for years.

Katie slurps her Frappuccino loudly and points at a figure beyond the fountain. I watch Bradley Boober jog by and tear up my cryptid list. I decide some strangers are better off not knowing.