

Switching Lanes

There's something funny about being hit by a car, I think, lying on the pavement, my body limp and useless. As often as we drive, you'd think more people would be hit by cars. Why don't people just expect to be hit at least once before turning twenty-one? I conjure up car-based parallel universes in my mind as I shift in and out of consciousness. My eyes refuse to focus, but in their peripherals I see the wide pick-up truck grind to a halt momentarily, its driver stepping out and looking at my dilapidated form from afar. They look around quickly and hop back into the vehicle, speeding off. The tires kick up dust and I continue thinking of parallel universes.

It takes a while for anybody to show up. I've accumulated countless universes by the time I'm put on a stretcher and rushed to the hospital. Someone I assume to be a paramedic asks a rhetorical question, so I keep postulating about a world where people drive backwards instead of forwards. I imagine accidents would be far more common in this universe.

I phase in and out of reality, sometimes waking to excruciating pain, other times to numbness and disorientation. I prefer the former, actually; the numbness is unwelcoming. I grow anxious if the feeling will ever come back to my hands, my fingers, my feet, my toes. But it comes rushing back in awful waves and I'm secretly grateful it hurts so bad.

Time passes. I've been here for a while. The people in white uniforms tell me I have brain damage. I don't know who these people are. They run some more tests. They put something in my IV. They let me puke in a bucket. Time passes. They put my arm in a cast and wrap my head in something soft. They say I have prosopagnosia. I tell them *gesundheit*.

After some time, I'm released from the hospital, and my parents drive me home. I stare out the window and start laughing at the thought of hitting somebody with our car. My mom asks what's funny, but she wouldn't understand the irony.

When I go back to school, I fear I've somehow crossed into one of my parallel universes. People I don't know say hello to me. Every classroom is full of new students and new teachers. Strangers claiming to be friends grow tired of introducing themselves over and over, and eventually stop trying altogether. I cry in the bathrooms and call my mom. She picks me up and takes me to see a therapist. The sound of the car chugging down the road is deafening. I curl up in the backseat and cover my ears.

My therapist introduces herself as Dr. Peggy Nell. She's an older woman, probably sixty-something. She sits herself on a thin, wooden stool and crosses her legs, peering at me through the tiny bifocals on her tiny spectacles. She occasionally taps her store-bought fake nails on her clipboard, or smacks her wide lips as if chewing on something. She smells strongly of cinnamon.

"Prosopagnosia," she says, looking at her clipboard. "Is that right?" She asks me to tell her about the accident. "Ah, I'm sorry to hear that," she says afterwards. "Do you fear automobiles?"

I shrug. "Not really. Maybe a little?" She writes something down. I lean forward to see what it is, but I can't read her handwriting.

"Is there anyone you reliably recognize?" she says.

"My parents."

"Is that it?"

"That's it."

Dr. Nell tells me to close my eyes and describe her. I try, but her features are just out of reach. Did she have her hair up? No, it's just short, right? Was she wearing glasses? Smart people wear glasses. A pair of windshield wipers begin scrubbing the frames as I picture them.

"Okay, that's alright. You can open your eyes."

I start to cry.

"Oh, stop that," she says sternly. "It's not the end of the world that you can't describe an old lady. We'll try something else."

Dr. Nell gives me a blank journal and disposable camera, and instructs me to document the people I meet. I take a picture of her, adhere it to the book, and add some supporting information to the page.

It helps, a little. I meet with her for the next couple months, making use of the journal to familiarize myself with her spectacled face and her cinnamon scent. I add some teachers to the book, a couple students, the principal, but the year ends and the faces become irrelevant. I graduate, summer passes, and I stop seeing Dr. Peggy Nell.

I go to a college out of state. My mom drives me and helps move me into my dorm. She tells me to see an on-campus therapist while I'm here. I tell her okay. She leaves and my roommate arrives. I tell him about prosopagnosia and add him to my journal. I don't see him much after that.

Friday afternoon, after finishing my classes for the week, I go to the student health building at the request of my mother. I check-in with the receptionist, and she points me to a small waiting area adjacent to her desk. Taking a seat, I decide to flip through a complementary PEOPLE magazine to kill time. Even most celebrities are faceless nobodies.

Soon enough, a woman approaches me. "You ready?" she asks.

I stand up. "Are you my therapist?"

Her face screws up and she mutters something under her breath. "I'm the receptionist. I just checked you in a couple minutes ago."

I slip into an alternate universe where my face turns multiple shades of red. The woman waves for me to follow her, and I trail her slowly, like a car with a flat tire. She leads me down a brightly lit hallway, a series of doors lining the aisle. I peer into an occupied room as we pass by, inadvertently making eye contact with a girl with wet eyes and a face almost as red as mine.

My escort points at the last door. "Dr. Maron will be happy to chat with you," she says quickly, then pushes past me and marches back to her desk. I briefly consider why she hadn't simply told me where to go, but in the same instant I forget what she looks like, and my question answers itself.

Dr. Maron's door creaks as I push it open. The small room is beige, decorated with dark cherry cabinets adorned with knickknacks and psychology books. A number of leather seats lay in the center of the room, arranged in a tight circle atop a rug with an annoying geometric pattern. The walls are dotted with cheesy motivational posters, save the wall opposite the room's entrance, which instead is occupied with a single semi-circular window. A large, square desk sits in front of the window, and behind the desk, a man.

The figure—who I presume to be Dr. Maron— is tall and lean, and much younger than I expected; can't be many years my senior. His hair is short and shaved at the sides (like every male student at the school), his wide face outlined with a dark, scruffy beard. He's rocking one of those graphic tees you'd find at Hot Topic—a dark tee with some caricature of Darth Vader.

Upon seeing me enter, he raises an eyebrow and stares at me for a long time. I stare back, studying every corner of his face, desperate to somehow memorize it instantly. Maybe this time would be different, I thought, and I could turn around and leave. Prosopagnosia cured!

A car alarm goes off in my head and I shake myself.

"You can have a seat," Maron says suddenly, gesturing to the leather chairs. "Make yourself comfortable."

I settle into one of the chairs, unzip my backpack, and rummage around for my journal. I begin scribbling an entry for my new therapist, and he takes a seat across from me.

"What's that?" he asks, leaning back in the leather seat. I sigh and show him. He wordlessly flips through the book, shortly meeting all the people I've forgotten. A chuckle escapes his lips.

"What?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

"No, what?"

"It's a face book," he laughs.

I grin, but I say it's not funny.

"Sorry," he offers, closing the book and returning it. "I get it."

Fearing I've made a bad impression, I gesture toward him. "I like this."

"Huh?"

I stroke my face. "The beard. I like it. I can't seem to grow one."

He smirks coyly and averts his eyes. "Let's get started, alright?"

He introduces himself as Dr. Lane Maron. He says he was a student here, got his master's, took a job here right after. He likes baseball and comedy movies. He quotes a line from a movie I've never seen, laughs at it, and then asks me to introduce myself, too.

I do, somewhat. I tell him my name. I tell him about my parents. I tell him I'm majoring in art. I tell him I do sudoku puzzles for fun. Eventually he has me tell him about the accident. He asks how it's affected me. I explain as much as I can, simultaneously observing the finer details of his face. Green eyes. Cut on left eyebrow. Mole under right eye.

We spend the entire session getting to know one another, though it feels more like an infodump on my part. I tell him about Dr. Nell, the journal, everything I've tried before. He tells me he has some ideas that we can explore in subsequent sessions.

I see him every week after that. True to his word, we try a lot of things. Most notably, during our 6th session, after noticing how intensely I'd been studying his face, he leaves the room and comes back wearing a paper bag over his head. He wears it for the rest of the session, getting me instead to study other aspects of his appearance. Hot Topic graphic tees. A semicolon tattoo on his wrist. It's weird not using a face to identify someone, but it actually does the trick. I apply the tactic to my professors, students, and for the most part, it helps.

He gives some other identification tips too. Familiarize yourself with a person's voice. Learn their mannerisms. Create code words or phrases. Every week, I use the journal less and less, committing names to memory instead of faces.

"Hey," he says suddenly, packing up after an October session. "Are you doing anything this weekend?"

"Other than studying, I don't think so."

"If you'd like, you could come back to my place," he says plainly. "After all, the more you see someone, the easier it is to recognize them."

"For what?"

"Fun," he says.

"I can't drive."

"I'll take you."

I open the passenger seat door and step into Dr. Maron's car. "Do you invite all your clients back to your place?"

He laughs heartily and buckles himself in. "I'm not allowed to divulge that information," he says. "Client confidentiality and all that." After a long pause, he adds, "But no, I don't."

He drives quickly, but not very far, his apartment only a ten minute drive from campus. We ascend the stairs to his place, and he lets us in. I'm barely four steps inside when he grabs and pulls me toward him. Hazard lights go off in my mind, but they dissipate the second he kisses me.

I begin staying at his place every weekend after our Friday sessions. Sometimes we watch movies. Sometimes we make out. Sometimes we play games. Sometimes we have sex. He cooks breakfast for me. I paint a picture of him. We celebrate my 20th birthday. I stop calling him Dr. Maron. His scent becomes unique, his voice welcoming, his touch unforgettable, and against all odds, his face becomes

memorable. I feel like I've slipped into another alternate universe, one I wouldn't mind staying in for a while.

"Are we dating?" I ask once.

"That came out of nowhere," he says between chuckles.

"Are we?"

"I don't know," he says. "I probably shouldn't date a client of mine."

"I could stop seeing you. For therapy. I don't really need it anymore, anyways."

Lane doesn't say anything to this.

"Really, I don't! Your face is—it's burned into my mind. I don't think I could forget it if I wanted to, y'know?"

He still doesn't say anything, but we continue seeing each other.

Finals week comes and goes, and the year comes to an end. As Lane drives me back to my dorm, my mom calls. She tells me she'll be here in the morning to help move me out.

"Do you think you'll still recognize me?" he asks, shifting his car into park outside my dorm. He shifts in his seat, eyes locked with mine.

I smile at him. "Of course."

I get out and wave as he drives off, and I go home for the summer. He told me not to text, not to call, so I don't. I distract myself with every little thing I can, but his image is always on the backburner of my mind. I wonder if he's helped me *too* much.

Over the summer, my dad buys a new car, and gives me his old truck. He teaches me how to drive, says I can drive myself back to school when the time comes. I'm hesitant at first, but I think Lane would want this for me. I can hear his voice saying *It's good to face your fears* or something like that.

Summer speeds by, and soon enough I'm parked outside my dorm. I hop out and slam the door, leaving my suitcases to fend for themselves as I sprint away toward the student health building.

The receptionist greets me, asks how my summer was. I run past her, into the hallway of doors. The door creaks familiarly as I throw open Lane's door.

A car alarm goes off in my head.

The small beige room becomes an alternate dimension of its own. The cherry cabinets are empty. The leather seats are gone. The annoying geometric rug is rolled up in the corner. The posters are missing. Only the desk remains, and behind the desk, a man.

The figure is tall and heavy, beer belly outlined against his shirt. His dark hair is pulled back into a bun, and his face is clean-shaven, a pair of glasses sitting delicately on the bridge of his nose. He's dressed up, wearing a plaid blue button-up and dark slacks.

"Oh, sorry, I must have the wrong room," I say quickly, turning to leave.

"Can we talk?"

A car crash plays on loop in my mind. It's Lane's voice.

I slowly turn, facing him again. I scan his features. They're hidden, but they're there. Tears well up in my eyes. "Why do you look like that?" I choke out. "Why do you look so different? It's only been a few months, I don't understand."

Lane shifts uncomfortably and sighs. "I thought this would make it easier."

"Make what easier? I can't even—I can't even recognize you."

He takes off his glasses and puts a hand to his face. "That's the point. I want you to forget about me."

I say nothing to this.

"I've accepted a position at another university."

"What...?" I choke out.

"God dammit," he says quietly. "We can't see each other anymore. We never should've seen each other in the first place. It's all my fault, you understand? I'm trying to make it right."

“That’s not fair!” I shout, putting my hands to my head. The sound of the cars crashing in my head is deafening. “It’s not fair, Lane! You can’t just—fix my head and then break my heart!”

He crosses his arms and looks away. “I’m sorry, I really am. This is the best I could think to do. For both of us.”

I glance up at him one more time, but our eyes don’t meet. His features are foggy behind my wet eyes, but I don’t care. I don’t want to remember his face.