



faceless in gethsemane

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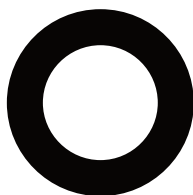
Mark Budz is the author of four novels, including Clade and Idolon, which were both finalists for the Philip K. Dick Award. His most recent novel is Till Human Voices Wake Us. His short fiction has appeared in Amazing Stories and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.

This story was inspired by an article Budz read about prosopagnosia—a disorder which prevents those suffering from it from recognizing faces—both their own and the faces of others. “The more I thought about it, the more that blankness became a sort of tabula rasa,” Budz said. “What if none of us were defined by our facial features and skin color? If ethnic background wasn’t physically apparent (at least according to standard stereotypes), how would we consciously and unconsciously judge a person? What would be the cost of losing these identifiers and what, if anything, would be gained?”



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mark budz



On the way home from work I swung by the library. Part of the reason for the detour was avoidance—I hadn't yet told my wife that my sister was coming to town. But mostly it was fear.

The police had set up a temporary chain link fence around the side and back parking lots. The only way in was through the front entrance. No razor wire that I could see. No protestors, either. The place was eerily calm.

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The Faceless Art Exhibit would be at the library's cultural arts center for a week. The show was one of several that were touring the country in an effort to inform people about Voluntary Fusiform Prosopagnosia. During the week a number of artists, doctors, anthropologists, and celebrities would take part in lectures, interviews, and panel discussions about face blindness. Keeley, who had several pieces in the art exhibit, was coming to help kick things off.

My wife and my sister had never gotten along. From the time we were kids, going through school, to the time Fran and I got married, they never liked each other. I'd hoped with time things would get better between them. Instead, they were like two magnets pushing at each other. The closer they got, the stronger their mutual aversion. It seemed inevitable one of them would leave.

"She doesn't like me," Fran complained from the beginning, less than a week after we started going out. "She never has."

"What makes you say that?"

"She always looks at me funny."

"Funny how?"

Fran hitched up her chin. "Intense. You know that look she has. I always get the feeling she's judging me."

"About what?"

"I have no idea."

"I don't think it's on purpose. It's just the way she is."

"She likes making people uncomfortable," Fran went

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on. “That’s why she says the crap she does. Do you know what she told me the other day? She said, ‘Your heart has been scarred by the moon.’ What is that supposed to mean?”

I had no idea. Keeley sometimes came out with stuff like that. It made people squirm. To be honest, I never totally understood her, either. Early on, we went our separate ways. Like any older brother, I ditched her whenever I could. Who wants a little sister tagging along, getting in the way and slowing you down?

Most people were glad when Keeley left town and even happier to have her out of their lives when they found out she’d gone VFP.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE it,” Fran fumed. “I can’t believe you agreed to let her stay here without discussing it first.”

I backed out of her way in the narrow kitchen. “We’re discussing it now.”

“No, this is you asking for forgiveness.” She shoved a casserole dish in the oven, then slammed the door hard enough to rattle the empty pots on the stove. “What the hell were you thinking? I don’t understand what’s gotten into you.”

“She’s my sister, for Christ’s sake. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“Why can’t she stay in a hotel?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Fran replaced a pot on a burner. “All I can say is I’m glad we don’t have kids yet.”

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“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Fran pinched the bridge of her nose. “Come on. Can you see your sister around children? They’d be traumatized for life.”

“She might have changed,” I said. The same reasoning I’d used when I agreed to put her up.

“Of course she’s changed.” Fran slipped off the oven mitts and flung them onto the counter.

“It might be for the better,” I said. “I mean, anything’s possible. She might even like you, now that she sees people differently.”

“So you’re hoping we’ll become friends. Is that it?”

“All I’m saying is give it a chance. Please. It’s only for one night. She’s leaving tomorrow, after the opening ceremony.”

Fran turned to me, her arms folded. “What if she doesn’t recognize you?”

I blinked. The thought hadn’t occurred to me. How could my sister not know me? “I don’t think it works like that.”

“How do you know? Have you ever talked to anyone who’s face blind?”

She knew damn well I hadn’t. I’d seen a few drawings, though. Everybody had. The artwork was all over the news. Nothing by Keeley, but I had a pretty good idea what to expect. You couldn’t escape the brouhaha, the video clips of burning cars and broken windows. “Now’s our chance to really find out how it works,” I said.

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“I don’t want to find out.”

“Aren’t you at least curious?”

“If you want to know the God’s honest truth, I’m not all that interested in how she sees the world. As far as I’m concerned, this whole thing is a circus. A freak show. The less I know the better.”

“Look,” I said. I spread my hands imploringly. “The least we can do is make her comfortable.”

“I don’t want her to be comfortable,” Fran said. “I want her to be as uncomfortable as the rest of us.”

IT STARTED OUT as a game, the way most regrets do.

I was ten at the time. I can see it: me and Steve and Keeley on the playground at recess. We’d gone behind the tall eucalyptus trees past the blacktop. Keeley had pigtails, a blue dress, and black Mary Janes. Her eyes were squeezed tight against the light sifting through the leaves and the curled bark.

“Like this,” she said.

And pressed her fingers against her eyelids.

Hard. For about ten seconds. I counted. Then she removed her hands from her face, but kept her eyes closed, looking very serious, the way she did whenever she played Ouiji.

“What do you see?” Steve asked.

“The future,” Keeley said.

“Bull.” He brushed it off, but looked uncertain.

“I see you kissing Myrtle Bumgirdle.” Myrtle’s last

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name was Baumgarten, but no one called her that. Not since Steve coined the nickname.

“You’re full of shit.” Steve sounded uneasy about the prediction, as if it hit a little too close to home.

“Try it,” Keeley said. “You’ll see.” Her eyes were still closed.

It was a dare. What could we do?

I shut my eyes, certain that Steve would do the same. I pressed my fingertips to my eyelids and started to count to ten.

By the time I reached five, colorful patterns began to emerge out of the darkness. I saw purple blobs, green swirls.

I lost track of how long I kept my fingers pressed to my eyes. I sometimes wonder if I pressed too hard, or too long.

A face formed out of the shapes. It formed like a photograph developing in my father’s closet darkroom—dim, at first, but growing more distinct as the details darkened and filled in.

“HOW DID YOU know it was me?” I asked, the first words out of my mouth since I’d picked Keeley up at the airport. We were on the drive down from Portland. We’d been quiet for the first half hour of the trip, an uneasy silence that eventually relaxed under the cloud-streaked sky and docile waves that lapped the rugged Oregon coast.

“Your hair,” she said. “It hasn’t changed a bit.”

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“Seriously,” I said. She’d never liked my hair. My hair was a joke to her.

“I am being serious,” she said.

I looked at her in the passenger seat. On the surface she didn’t seem any different. I didn’t know whether to believe her or not. “What if I’d gone bald?” I said. “Or grown a mustache?”

“There would’ve been other clues.”

“Like what? I mean, what do you really see?”

“I see noses, eyes. But they aren’t any particular shape. They aren’t thin or wide, or round or almond-shaped. They aren’t any shape. They’re just there. Mouths, too, and lips. They’re there, but they’re not.”

“The same for everybody,” I said. “One size fits all.”

“Pretty much.” She wrinkled her nose, which was petite and upward curving, lightly sprinkled with freckles she had once tried to convince me were in the shape of a distant and as yet undiscovered constellation.

“So how do you recognize people?” I said.

“Well, like with you, a lot of times I recognize people by their hair. Or their height, weight, and body shape. Things like that. There are other indicators, too. That’s what they were teaching me at the center. But they aren’t tied to any particular racial or cultural background.”

“But you’re not color blind when it comes to things other than skin,” I said. “Right?”

She nodded.

“So what do you see when you look at a person’s skin?”

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“I don’t know,” Keeley said. “I don’t know what color I see when I look at people. It’s like there isn’t any color.”

“How can there not be any color?” I asked.

“I can’t explain it,” she said. “That’s part of the problem when you try to paint it or describe it to people. You have to see it to believe it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. She looked beat. “You’ve probably heard the same questions a million times before.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she said. She turned her head to look out the window at a passing beach house and the waves beyond. “People are afraid of what they don’t understand.”

As we entered town, a large group of protestors stood outside of the library. The protestors—White, African American, Hispanic, Asian, you name it—brandished signs that had catch phrases like ERASIST and SUPPORT DIVERSITY, NOT PERVERSITY. A couple of them wore featureless white masks, hockey masks with white cloth over the eye and mouth holes.

“So how’s Fran?” Keeley said, as if the protestors had made her think of my wife.

“Are you wondering what you’re in for?” I said.

A laugh, oddly carbonated, bubbled up from deep in her throat. “I still don’t know what you see in her,” she said.

I shrugged.

“Come on.” She pretended to jab me in the ribs, pulling back as soon as I flinched. “You can tell me.”

“I’m not sure I can.”

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“Okay. Then what don’t you see in her?”

My fingers tightened on the wheel. “Good question,” I finally said. “I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

“Same old Trev.”

I couldn’t tell if it was disappointment I heard, or affection. “So why’d you really leave?” I asked.

“You don’t think it was just to become faceblind?”

“No.”

She thought for a moment, staring out at the beach cottages on her side of the road. “I guess you could say I left for the same reason you stayed.”

I assumed she was talking about Fran, but then she added, “I didn’t want to be the person other people had made me into.”

“And I did?”

She turned from the cottages to me. “Didn’t you? Generous Trevor. Level-headed Trevor. Never-loses-his-temper Trevor.”

“That’s not true. You know that.”

“It doesn’t matter. People don’t care how you see yourself. It’s who people think you are that matters most to them. Turn against those expectations, and they turn against you.”