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# This Fisher King and Drugstore Wall

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# This Fisher King and Drugstore Wall

"Where is he?" John complained. He dragged on his cigarette. This was not his territory and he felt restless.

"Give him some time. He's not that late. We were just a little early, that's all. Take in the sites," Carl suggested.

"What sights? Like that bunch of black guys over there eyeing us? We should have met some where else."

"Relax John. Those guys aren't interested in us. Besides, they take one look at you and know you're broke. Really Johnny, the city ain't that bad and this neighborhood is tame."

"Hmf," John just grunted a little and kept his eyes on his subject. He put on his shades and leaned against the corner drugstore wall. After a while of unproductive staring he said, "Maybe you're right, Carl. This is your city. You know it better than I do. I guess maybe I'm just a little bored." He put his hands in his pocket, cigarette still hanging from his mouth, and turned to scope a view of their side of the walkway down the street. "I need to scope me some skirt."

"Whatever keeps you happy Johnny. Why don't you keep your eyes peeled for Danny while you're at it." Carl stood restive but alert. He looked around some but kept focusing in the direction he expected Dan to come from.

"Sure thing pal. But if I catch sight of some gorgeous pair of legs I'm gone."

"You're all talk," Carl dismissed with a light shake of his head, a small punctuating breath escaping his nostrils. "At least you better be tonight. Dan's been looking forward to getting together since you've come up. He really took to you on his visit downstate. He thinks you're cool." Carl put his hands in his pockets and leaned his back to the wall.

John pushed off the wall to pace an imperfect circle as he inhaled his last puff of smoke before tossing it to the ground. "Well that's just swell, Carl. Danny boy loves me." He let out one laugh without much jocular behind it. "I don't care much for him," he continued. "He's got no guts and he don't do much."

Carl pushed off the wall, too, facing Johnny for a moment of his wobbly orbit. "What do you mean you don't like him? You spent almost two whole days hanging out together while I went to classes. You drank that entire bottle of Jack Daniel's and harassed those girls together. I thought you two bonded or something."

"Or something. Jeeze, Carl, you make it sound like we got married." John took off his shades and hooked them over the front of his t-shirt. He ran his hands over his long hair, getting the bangs out from in front of his eyes. He went for another cigarette and held it between his lips while fishing his pocket for his lighter. He lit it and puffed at the smoke with slow, deliberate motion. "No, Dan's alright," he drawled unselfconsciously. "He's really alright when you get him drinking." He laughed again, this time a crude smile lay behind it.

"Yeah, he's funny."

"Yeah, John boy, I think you brought out a whole new side in Dan." Carl relaxed into the wall again. "I've never seen him so pumped up before. That's why he likes you, ya know? You wake up some sleeping part in him and now he's discovering that he's alive."

John had laughed comfortably back to the wall but now he was again looking up the street, dragging pointedly on his cigarette. He drew it out with his big hand and let out a dense waft of smoke. John used cigarettes to help his hand punctuate his sentences. "You know," he began slow, "you have this way of sayin' things.... If I didn't know you, Carl, I'd say you was a fag." John pulled out his loose single dollar bills after occupying his mouth with the smoke. He had finished his sentence with a practiced calm finality, followed by a busy count of his cash. He already knew he had just enough for a pint of liquor with a chaser or for two quarts of cheap beer.

Carl watched his activity with a contemplative smirk. "Well you do know me, John. So why do you think I tell you these things?" Carl leaned toward Johnny's profile, which seemed to be having trouble finding something to do. His face became still and Carl sent his words in to tag some kind of base. "Johnny, get real. You know I'm not trying to set you up with Dan. Do you really have that much trouble talking about your friends?"

John reeled his head in over his shoulders which he unslouched with stringy tightness. The same pull seemed to control his face. The snarl beneath his rigid skin, rolled up with an inhale of his own second hand smoke, covered his voice with dirty cool. "Friends is on thing," John said around his cigarette while stuffing his cash back into his pocket. He turned to face his companion. "But this 'waking up parts of Dan' talk is too much, Carl. Don't tell me shit like that." He delivered his command with outspread hand bobbing authoritatively, his cigarette now between his fingers. He finished his words and began to smoke, his eyes straight ahead.

Carl took in a deep, even breath and let it out slowly. He folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in harder against the rough bricks, then turned around to rest his forehead against them. He looked into their lines and patterns, the cracks in the old building trying to tell him something. He uncrossed his arms, let one drop as the other led his hand to trace over the texture of his wall. He let himself imagine that he could make it better, kiss the wall and restore its soundness, make it smooth and beautiful. But he was no prince and princesses were hard to come by. So he just said his apologies to his beast of clay cement. "Sorry, there's nothing I can do," he murmured. He pushed away from his place with the tracing hand and looked down to where bricks met the sidewalk. He let his gaze trail to his friend's shoe, then to the cigarette hand, then past it down the lit-up street.

"What'd ya say, Carl?" John asked, speaking more tentatively now. He thought he felt the time shift or the street change shape. A strong smell burned past his own inhaled smoke. He was looking at Carl now, but he was different, too. His eyes were less green, his features more defined but less recognizable. Carl's eyes traveled further past John, picking out shapes of the city street

without bothering to identify them anymore. He let these shapes hold him, rather than needing the wall's support, while John seemed to shift his back further into it. John looked at his own hands, and then to the cigarette that was almost smoked to the butt. He kept himself from sliding to the sidewalk with the t-shirt from his back scraping the brick all the way. He wanted to sit down. He wanted to get drunk. He wanted to go into the drugstore to buy his liquor without having to say anything to Carl, but it didn't seem right. "Shit, Carl," he said almost softly, "I don't feel too good."

Carl set his distant gaze back to see that John's face was subdued with a dim and never before acknowledged confusion. He let himself identify it and began again to put names to things. "No, something in the air isn't quite right, Johnny. We need to go some place, find someplace good." He let his feet bring him to action, took two steps away from John, and one toward. "We need someplace with beer and lots of napkins to draw on. Someplace with music. Come on, John. That will make us feel better." He went up closer to his friend and gripped his shoulder, then gave him a couple of solid pats of friendly encouragement. "Don't worry about cash. You've got enough for a glass, and I'll take care of it from there."

Carl let his hand rest on John's back while he waited for the response. John did not resist Carl's easy show of camaraderie but looked blankly unsure. "What about Dan?" his deep voice now questioned softly. Unable to keep Carl's gaze on his own eyes, John shifted them slightly toward the car parked beside his cajoling partner. Carl let his hand slide off, collapse at a rest to his own side, and find its way to his pocket. He looked at the wrist just outside the pocket, checking the time that had randomly moved past them almost without notice.

"Hell, Johnny. He's past late now. We'll call his house from the bar." Carl began to walk. "Come on," he said, directing mildly with a jerk of his head. "Dan probably just needs his absence to make a difference."