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## A Ghost I'd Known

Oscar Cabeza was a strange person, and I'd be the last in line to deny it. He was locally famous for what he did to the cannery, and thereon what he stood for. The incident was how I met him, for I'd been among the first crowd to witness the intense vandalization of that dark brick building on the corner of town. In spray paint, displayed was the brutalization of live and dead fish alike, conveyor belts flooded with their own blood, red Xs slashed over their eyes, their minced bodies spilling onto the pavement below. Dark red letters delivered the punchline: "*THEY'RE JUST FISH.*" It was horrifying, and it was thoroughly art. It was the first time I had ever noticed the cannery even existed.

Oscar did community service for three weeks afterwards, and I was there for every day of it. I was fascinated by him, more than anything. We weren't very old, sixteen at most; from what I remembered, he wore mismatched socks almost exclusively, had the fluffiest hair I'd ever seen, and insisted his friends called him Oz. I'd accused him of making that up, and he told me blatantly that he did, and that I'd get to be the first. It was an honor.

"Why'd you do it?" I'd asked him one day before his service was complete. The paint had been washed away, but phantom outlines of the fish were forever sunk into the brick surface.

"Well, someone had to. Someone has to do everything, or nothing would ever get done." He talked with his hands a lot, and even more when he was educating me. "Did you know fish can feel pain? They can, and people still take them apart alive. It's not as bad here as it is in other parts of the world, but we have to start somewhere."

The sun was setting, and it lit us both, all flushed and weary from the day's work. It was how the sky romanticized our summertime endeavors, I think. I didn't assist him with the service most days, because I was always busy writing something down. He always had something new I wanted to note, especially if it was about him.

In passing, I asked, "Do you want to be a marine biologist or something?"

He chuckled. "No, why would you think that?"

There must have been an unspoken understanding between us, because even though he did his time, we still met at the cannery most days after. Sometimes we'd go off together and be productive; others, we'd just lean against the wall and talk. Regardless, I was never bored.

The day I remember best, Oz and I had taken to the streets, ambling along aimlessly, window shopping. Something had caught his attention in the alley, and I turned to catch what he was gazing at.

"I don't see it," I commented.

"That," he exclaimed, and gestured offensively at a plastic soda bottle lying by the edge of a gutter. Litter—nothing unusual, but I knew him well enough by then.

"I've got it," I said, and hopped over to the discarded container. When I picked it up, I drew in a breath as a broken piece of the plastic cut into my index finger.

"Oh! Are you okay?" He regarded my injury with wide eyes.

"Yeah, yeah," I assured him, then glanced back at the bottle. Then, I gasped as I looked more carefully at it.

"What now?"

"This is one of those reward bottles, when soda companies pair with the stores they sell at. You know, like the Golden Ticket from Willy Wonka?"

"Man, I haven't seen that movie in forever." He lifted it from my grasp and looked it over. Sure enough, on the inside of the cap was a shiny serial code.

We dashed into the nearest convenience store to try and redeem it. The cashier input the serial code into a dirt-old computer, then offered us one free item from the shop.

"Oh, I know what. Wait outside," Oscar told me, then rushed into the back. I did exactly that, and a minute or so passed out in the fleeting sun. When he returned, he had a small bag in his hands.

"Wanna go by the docks?" he asked cheerfully.

“Um, sure.”

It was a short walk, and, as usual, the view was worth it. The docks there were one of those small town things, little staples that made up childhood memories.

As we sat on the piers, our feet dangling off the edge, my curiosity got the better of me.

“What’d you get?” I asked him.

“I was just about to show you.” And out of the bag he pulled a small package of Band-aids.

“Huh?”

He flashed a smile at me. “For your finger.”

At that moment, underneath the warm summer sky with waves lapping at my feet, he gently unwrapped one of the Band-aids and took my hand into his, sealing off my wound. Looking back, I pinpoint this as the moment I first fell in love with him.

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Time went on since then. When summer drew to a close, I remember what I said to him as he was boarding the train, bound back to his home somewhere in the east. “See you next summer,” I’d promised. “Don’t forget to write.” And I never saw him again.

The years went by, and the spattered remains of the cannery’s rebel mural washed away with the rain. The town seemed to forget about any Oscar Cabeza, and in time, so did I. Whenever I thought back to that summer, the only thing that came to mind was the warmth of a Band-aid hugging my skin.

One cold morning, somewhere in a downtown area where my college career had come to rest, I was out walking with a fellow classmate, wading through streets frosted with snow. We watched our breath turn to fog before falling back in our faces, listening to the suburban sounds in the early hours of November.

“Have you joined any clubs?” she asked me, tying her braids up in a ponytail.

“Just one so far,” I responded. “I forget the official name— it’s the one where we do community service once a week.”

“Aw yeah, I looked at that. Didn’t want to get up so early every day, though.” She sniffed. “Why does this street smell so bad? Damn.”

“Huh?”

We passed by a building that looked something like a small factory, with a little cartoon fish hanging over the doorway.

“Oh, the fishery.” My classmate stuck out her tongue, then kept walking.

I stayed in place for a moment, just staring at the little building.

*Oh, wow. I forgot all about it, didn't I?*

Suddenly, it didn’t seem so cold out.

*Oscar Cabeza.*

Sometime around noon, I was able to sit down and search for him. He wasn’t on Facebook, wasn’t on Twitter— that seemed fair. My eyes lingered on every name that came up on Instagram and Snapchat. No matter where I looked, though, he wasn’t there. No digital footprint to even speak of.

“Must have sworn off it,” I reasoned with myself. That seemed like something he would do. I could almost hear his voice now— “*Social media? I never liked it; why would I try to make a million friends when I only need one?*”

I smiled to myself.

I’m not sure where all my curiosity was coming from. Maybe it was because Oscar was an icon to me when I was younger; his bright demeanor, his bold statements, and his thirst for change never failed to move me. It could have been anything between a warm smile and a ripple of chills— he never let me get bored. On the contrary, maybe it was because he felt like a mystery now. The boy who appeared for one summer, left his mark in red spray paint, and then disappeared forever— it was straight out of a coming-of-age novel.

Or maybe it was because I’d loved him, and if I’d loved him then, maybe I would love him even more now.

I glanced at the date in the corner of my screen. There were a couple days left on campus before I was scheduled to go home for Thanksgiving break. Maybe someone would know what happened to him there. Someone had to have kept an eye on him; he was quite memorable, after all.

The hours dripped by, then days, then a whole week. It felt like a lifetime before my plane finally landed in California, where I rented a car and drove myself to one of the state’s forgotten crevices. The bright sky and creaky buildings were instant memories restored; I was no stranger here.

My parents greeted me with warm arms and how-do-you-dos, their cheeks full with smiles on seeing their youngest daughter again.

"I've missed you, too," I was saying to them, my bags dropped in front of a time-stained couch.

"How are your grades?" my dad asked. "That history major treating you well?"

"Plenty," I assured him. A reminder pricked the back of my mind; "By the way, do you guys remember a kid named Oscar Cabeza?"

"Hmm?" My mother released me from her embrace to look at me. "No, I don't seem to recall one..."

"He's the guy that vandalized the cannery," I elaborated.

"There's a cannery in this town?" My dad snorted. "Sorry, pumpkin, I just *can-* 't remember."

"Your dad jokes never fail me, old man." I nudged him gently. "Anyways, forget it. Are we planning on dinner?"

*It's alright. It was just one summer, after all* I followed my parents into the kitchen. *I'll ask around a little more.*

As it happened, we did have plans for dinner— company. A who's who of my highschool friends and neighbors, one by one, made their appearances, serving offerings of baked macaroni and assorted desserts. Our dinner table was stacked, and it wasn't even Thursday.

"Remind me where you got accepted?"

"Purdue. I'm a history major."

"Any boyfriend yet? Or girlfriend?"

"Ha! Unlikely."

"I hope you're not allergic to salmon— I grilled some."

"That actually looks wonderful!"

The questions and comments were rapid fire in a mass conversation. I made my own inquiries, too.

"Do you remember the guy who painted the cannery in sophomore year?"

"Oh, I think I saw that on the local news. Never met him, though."

"What do you mean, cannery?"

"It's where they package fish, Joseph."

"Don't remember it."

"None of you have heard of a person named Oscar Cabeza?"

"Can't say I have."

"Me, neither."

"Why do you ask?"

"Ah... no reason. Just curious if he still lived here."

When the food had been served and cups of pudding littered the table, a girl I had been neighbors with throughout grade school piped up, her shrill voice capturing my attention.

"Hey, I think a man named Daniel Cabeza still lives in this area."

I turned my gaze on her. "Really?"

"Yeah, you want the address?"

Daniel Cabeza was the uncle Oscar had stayed with during his summer here. He was never someone I paid much attention to, though I knew that Oscar had relatives in the area. This was the day that all changed.

He lived in a small, cozy house by the bay, the baby blue paint peeling off in waves. The doorbell buzzed instead of rang, like it was whispering to the person living inside. *Psst. There's a visitor.*

A tanned man with silver hair answered. His eyes brought with them a striking fit of nostalgia— this must have been where Oscar got his.

"Hi," I greeted the man. "I'm a friend of Oscar Cabeza's. Does he still live here?"

Daniel Cabeza studied me for a second. His first words surprised me: "You're that girl he liked over that summer. Saorise?"

A flush of heat rose through my face. "O-oh! You remember me?"

He chuckled, then reached behind him towards a small vanity that stood in the hall. His hand brought back with it a small, handcrafted picture frame. My eyes fluttered on seeing the photo inside: me and Oscar, laughing together as we walked up to the house from the sea.

"Wow. I had no idea this picture existed." I inspected it for a second more, then handed the frame back to him.

"Yes, but it's a good thing it does, hmm?" He smiled, then placed the picture back on the table. "Welcome back to town, sweetheart. What can I do for you?"

I explained the situation to him: how I'd been wanting to see Oscar, and how impossible it seemed to be to find him. His uncle nodded knowingly, then asked to see my phone.

"My phone? Well, alright."

I unlocked it, then handed it over to him. With deceptively quick fingers, the man typed something in, then handed it back to me. On the screen was a new contact— *Oscar*.

“Oh, wow.” My heartbeat made itself known. “Thank you so much, Mr. Cabeza!”

“Thank you for coming by, Miss Saorise.”

It was dark out when I finally called him. The moon’s reflection was scattered across the bay, and the docks were quieter than normal. I stood on one of them, leaning against the pier, phone in sweaty hands.

He picked up on the second ring.

“Hello?”

A grin broke out on my face. I was really talking to him. After all this time.

“Oz?”

A pause.

“...Saorise?”

A little laughter escaped me. “Um, hi!”

“Hi! How’d you get this number?”

“Your uncle gave it to me.” The wind picked up my hair as I spoke. “He was unbelievably nice.”

“*Heh, yeah, he’s a great guy.*”

I traced circles on the wood. “Do you regularly pick up the phone for unknown numbers?”

“*You don’t? Surprise is the spice of life, Saorise. Maybe I’ve called you a million times, and you’ve just never known.*”

My tracing finger came to a halt. “Have you?”

He laughed a little awkwardly, the other end of the line crackling. “*I, uh, not in a long time. I more or less made peace with the fact that I probably wouldn’t see you again. Still, I tried.*”

“Oh, wow, Oscar, I’m so sorry. You said you didn’t have a phone number when we were friends.”

“*I didn’t. I do now, though.*”

I looked back up at the little blue house up the hill. The street lamps didn’t shed any light on it.

“So... why was it so hard to find you?”

“*What do you mean?*”

“Well, I thought you were this passionate activist,” I told him, and perhaps a little of my wistfulness crept into my voice. “I figured I might find you on social media, but I didn’t.”

“*Of course. Never really needed it— all of my friends are right herè.*”

“I tried asking people around town when I got here,” I barreled on, a little bit of pride that I guessed his reasoning filed away to think on later. “No one remembered you except your uncle. That’s weird, right? Why am I the only one who remembers you?”

It was quiet on the line for a cool second.

“*I don’t think anyone does,*” he told me. His voice was more earnest than I expected, even from him. Earnest, and a bit... resigned. “*Don’t get me wrong, I did a lot of stuff, including painting the cannery. I was obsessed with righting wrongs and making a difference as a kid.*” He let go of a breath. *As an adult, though, I realize that I never impacted anything. Nothing is different, so it’s alright if people forget about me. I haven’t done anything to earn being remembered.*”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“You? You, Oscar Cabeza, are okay with being forgotten?” I clutched the phone tighter. “But— but you’re the most memorable person I know.”

“*Well, Saorise, did you never forget about me?*”

I thought back to the fishery. Slowly, my fingers loosened their grip.

“Oscar... is it okay if I call you back later?”

I could hear him sitting up. “*Oh, jeez, did I make you upset? I’m sorry?*”

I chuckled. “No, nothing like that. Just let me call you back, okay?”

“*I— okay. Bye, Saorise.*”

“Bye.”

As the phone line clicked, I swapped it out in my pocket for my credit card. I had these streets memorized; I knew where the nearest craft store was.

The time passed into midnight. I was going to get kicked out of school for this, if anyone cared. The thing is, I hoped they cared. So, so much.

I had to use a flashlight and squint, but I could see them. Ancient lines, little spots like freckles on the brick surface. It smelled like fish outside. Fish, and paint chemicals.

I started working.

Morning came when I called Oscar back.

“Saorise?”

“Download Instagram,” I instructed him. “That’s a request.”

“No problem.” Instant response. “Why?”

“There’s something I want you to see.”

It took a minute. The sun crept over the horizon to have a peek; shadows fell off the side of the cannery.

“Alright, I’m in. What’s your handle?”

I gave him my username, waited as he searched it up. Then, clear as day, I heard him gasp.

“Read the caption,” I said.

His voice was sparkling. “*In paint: ‘THE IMPACT IS ALWAYS BIGGER THAN YOU THINK.’ Dedicated to the original artist, my friend Oz, in protest of inhumane fishing practices. 27 likes.*”

“Do you like it?”

I waited. Then, I heard a laugh. Small, at first, but it grew. It was as explosive as I remembered him being.

“Saorise, let me tell you something.” His voice was rejuvenated. “*I don’t care if the world is exactly the same as I left it. If I’ve affected just one person, I’ll die happy.*”

“Consider it done,” I told him, finally walking away from the cannery. Behind me, bursting with bright red streaks, was a familiar mural brought back to life.