Crystal Chen Chen

Seeing

How limited is human sight and how much do we miss on a daily basis? Questions like these had plagued me as I watched the world around me change rapidly. A few years ago, while I was a junior in college, I truly began to notice a severe lack of perception in the people around me. I lived in a shoebox of a room shared by a friend of mine. We had clashing schedules since I was a science major and she was studying architecture. While I was burning out the filament in my desk lamp memorizing facts, she was off working on drafts in the studio, oblivious to the world around her. As I did not have someone to distract me during my study breaks, I began to walk on the paths near my campus.

I was on one of my mind-clearing walks around the lake. The break from the carbon structures and human anatomy allowed me to truly take in what surrounded me. The mid-afternoon sun glistened upon the murky, cold water of the lake turning the water gold. The sounds of squirrels chasing one another filled my headphone-free ears. The smell of nature overwhelmed my nostrils as I meditatively made my way on the wooded path. I stopped to take in the sight of rippling water and the animals that claimed home there. The carefree sight widened my eyes with happiness as a wide smile crossed my lips. It was truly a sight to behold. I wondered how many before me saw such a sight as they made their way around the lake. Then he hit me.

We had both fallen roughly to the ground. As I made my way back to a standing position and brushed off the dirt on my jacket, I saw him scramble to gather his phone and headphones which lay scattered in the path. He stood up, flustered with red in his cheeks and an apology on his lips. The force that he ran into me with reminded me of a tank crushing obstacles in its path. His athletic build was slightly off-set by the jagged scar that crossed one of his concerned, piercing blue eyes. He raised a tan and slightly scarred hand to introduce himself as Gavin with an apologetic grin. After shaking his hand and introducing myself, Gavin offered to buy me coffee to make up for running into me. I hesitated since he was essentially a stranger to me, but because of my caffeine obsession I took him up on his friendly offer. He gave me a smile after my affirmation. As we made our way to the nearby café, Gavin talked about his love for running and the various run-ins he had with rocks, stray branches, and of course people. He was such an adamant speaker. His arms waved excitedly in the air and his bright blue eyes lit up as he described his passion and related his tales to me.

As the weeks passed since the encounter, we gradually became good friends and running partners. Distracted by one sight after another, I always found myself lagging behind him. Once it was a game of tag among three squirrels in the trees. Another time it was the breathtaking sight of the sun on the lake. Every time I stopped to take in what was going on around me, it would take Gavin a couple of moments to realize I was not huffing and puffing beside him. He would always backtrack with a small smile that slightly crinkled his scar and made his ocean blue eyes shine. At first it was a quirky questioning smile sprinkled with a dash of suspicion at what I was doing. Eventually it became a knowing smile that reflected trust in his eyes and told me that he understood. He would ask me what was up and follow the direction I was pointing with his glittering blue diamond eyes. It was in this way that I tried to open Gavin’s eyes to the world that so many people never noticed.

One run through a trail in the nearby forest was filled with so much natural beauty that I had completely stopped, breathless. Gavin wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his shirt, flashed a smile, then told me that he would finish his last mile and come back for me. I nodded meditatively and watched his beaten, black and blue running shoes expertly pick their way through the fallen branches and nearly hidden roots. How was it that his feet could see what was going on around them, but not his eyes? It was always a struggle to try to get him to see things himself. The only time he seemed to notice something was when I pointed it out to him. He, like so many of my friends, never could truly understand my ceaseless obsession with what was going on around me.

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Not so long ago I read an article in the paper that dealt with the blindness of the human population. Though time has now blurred all of the specifics in the article, I remember it dealt with a millionaire dressed like a beggar on a crowded street. He held a sign offering people twenty dollars if they shook his hand. In the course of an afternoon, only a handful of people shook his hand. Most walked by the man without even sparing a glance. What had people come to that they would totally block out what was around them?

I had sat in the same general area of the forest waiting for Gavin to return. After almost an hour of not seeing his red dri-fit shirt, the dark started creeping between the forest leaves. Worried, I started down the path that Gavin took, taking care to not twist my ankle on the various rocks and roots. About half a mile down the hidden trail I found a struggling and bleeding Gavin clutching at a gash on his head, his face a picture of pain. The sound of my footsteps caused him to avert his eyes upward, the grimace of pain deepening across his face. I looked around the forest floor to see what could have happened. My eyes caught on the fresh glistening blood that marked a sharp looking boulder. I rushed over to Gavin and cautiously helped him up. As he wrapped his strong, lightly scarred arm around my shoulders for support, a cool liquid brushed my face. Lost in the immediate relief it brought, it took me a second to realize it was raining. My moment was disrupted by a small groan escaping Gavin’s spilt lips. His dark brown hair laid unusually flat, matted with dirt, blood, and rain. His face was still screwed up in pain, making his scar look slightly like a bolt of lightning. As quickly as we could, I picked the way out of the forest and towards the clinic.

“Guess I should have seen that root. Might have avoided hitting that rock if I didn’t trip,” he laughed wincingly as the nurse wrapped his forehead in the healing, soft white gauze. I nodded with a small smile and told him that now he had another scar story he could tell. He started to laugh but the pain and the stern looking nurse forced him to settle with a cheery grin. There was silence for a moment as the nurse left to gather some pain meds. Gavin reached out and lightly twisted his finger around the out-of-place blonde strand among my sea of brown hair, with a distracted look in his eyes. I gave him a quizzical look and the stormy clouds in his sky blue eyes vanished as he quietly told me thank you.

After that day, Gavin began to join me in my mind-clearing walks about the lake and in the forest. Due to his injury, he was out of running for a while, which allowed him to actually begin seeing what I normally saw. Then one day in the late afternoon, as we walked around the lake, his eyes filled with awe and a truly-happy smile crossed his features as he pointed at the lake. His old scars and new scar seemed to melt away in the light of his new happiness, revealing a new Gavin before my eyes. I turned away from his face and allowed my eyes to follow his finger. The golden sun’s beams, made the usually dark lake, gleam with the light of a thousand suns. A paddling of ducks swam in synchronization across the gilded lake causing small ripples that made the sight all the more magical. Taking Gavin’s warm hand, I smiled and laid my head on his arm, happy that he finally could see the world around us.