

Prosopagnosia

'Just describe the guy for us, if you wouldn't mind.'

'I can't.'

'There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing will happen to you.'

'No, I can't.'

'Come on, what are you afraid of?'

'It's nothing, I-'

'Then tell us what he looked like!'

'I can't! I don't remember!'

'Don't remember?'

'That's right. The guy just had one of those faces, I suppose. It was so forgettable, I kept looking up and thinking I had a new customer.'

'Okay miss, that will be all. Thank you for your time.'

'It's my pleasure. I'm sorry I couldn't help, but I do hope you catch the guy.'

'Yeah.' The detective led her out of the interrogation room and stood in the doorway, watching her walk away. He turned and bumped into his partner.

'Watch it, McNulty.'

'Sorry, I was miles away.'

'You'll certainly wish you were in a second.'

'What do you mean?'

'The mayor's got wind that none of the seven witnesses could give us anything on the perp. Apparently he's going berserk - best prepare for a reaming.'

'I'm sure it'll be fine. Me and the mayor seem to see eye-to-eye.'

'Wish I could say the same. Damned fool's always getting up in my shit over this, that or the other. Just the other day he brings me into his office to call me a loose cannon, as if I don't get enough of that from the chief. I swear, I don't know if I'll make it to my retirement or just shoot myself before then. Or shoot them? That'd probably work just as well.'

'Three days away, isn't it? I don't know, the chief means well - you just need to cut him some slack.'

'Maybe you're right, McNulty. You'd better hope so he's on his way over right now.' McNulty looked over his shoulder; the chief was making his way towards him with strong, purposeful strides.

'Later, partner.'

'Later.' McNulty was left alone with the chief.

'McNulty.'

'Chief.'

'It's the mayor, he wants to talk to you in my office.'

'How is he?' The chief sighed.

'He's pretty pissed, but you'll be okay. You and him have such good rapport, you know that? I think it's because you're such a restrained cannon, you're always getting the mayor off my ass.'

'I just do my job, chief.'

'I know, but bugger me if you don't do it well.'

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'What do you mean "none of them could remember what the guy looked like"?'*

'Exactly how it sounds, sir. We interviewed all seven witnesses, and they all said the exact same thing; the guy had an almost remarkably unremarkable face. None of them could recall a single detail.'

'Not even the bank teller? She must have been staring right at him.'

'Not even the teller. For all we know, this man is the most pathologically average-looking man in the world.'

'Goddamn. Goddamn, goddamn, goddamn.'

'Calm down, sir.' The mayor took some deep breaths.

'How many times have I told you not to call me sir, McNulty?'

'Sorry, sir. I suppose I just can't get past my unwavering respect for the chain of command.'

'I know you can't, and it's why you're such a damned good police. Do we have anything to go on, anything at all?'

'Nothing. We got prints, but they're close matches to about two hundred different people. Even his DNA is frustratingly indistinct. The man wouldn't stand out if he was alone.'

'Damn.'

'Damn's about damned right, sir.'

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He splashed the cool water on his face and looked up at himself in the bathroom mirror. Everyone he had ever known, in some small measure, looked back at him. The man possessed an incredible asset; that of the single least memorable face in all the world. The longer one looked at it, the more it seemed to resemble everybody they had ever seen in some small way, from the positioning of the eyes to the width of the nose, but never did it settle on a single recallable face. It was the ultimate in anonymity. He looked into the reflection, blinked and started, having briefly thought a stranger was looking back at him from his own bathroom. Despite having had twenty years to get used to his condition, the man had never fully grown accustomed to it and could still occasionally catch himself out. These instances did not annoy him, rather, they encouraged him in his reliance on the ephemerality of his identity – his killer edge in the committal of crimes. He glanced in the mirror, through the crack of the bathroom door and onto his bed, where three overstuffed duffel bags lay on a pool of assorted bills. His latest haul had been particularly rewarding—roughly a million and then some—and he was still working off the adrenaline buzz. He wondered why he still felt the thrill of evading capture when, as the last twenty years of success could attest, the chances were so slim as to be nil. Using his extraordinary gift, he slid in and out without leaving the slightest impression. Truth be told, it was all starting to bore him.

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McNulty opened the front door and stepped into the warmth from the biting cold of another winter evening. He rubbed his hands together before slowly and stiffly removing his coat. When done, he made his way into his living room where his wife sat curled up before the blazing fire, engrossed in a book. He walked up and gave her a kiss, then peeked into the dining room. The table was laid, but there was no food on it. For a moment, he feared that he had been so late that his wife had eaten without him, but this notion was dispelled when she rose and walked over to the kitchen, withdrawing two plates of food and placing them in the microwave. McNulty smiled. 'I'm sorry I was late, you didn't have to do that.'

'No, it's fine. I wouldn't want to eat without you, and I know that you have late nights now and then as a policeman, but it doesn't bother me one bit.' They kissed again, and McNulty was struck by the realisation that he truly didn't understand what his co-workers meant about when they complained about their wives nagging them about their work lives. Someone had even said something about his wife asking him to choose between the job or her – the thought seemed entirely alien to McNulty, whose wife had always been hugely supportive of his career and respected his choice. Reflecting on it, McNulty couldn't remember his wife having ever really nagged him. He chalked it up to statistics as he sat opposite her and they tucked into their meals; surely, every now and then, someone was bound to get married to a woman they got on well with. 'How was work?' That was another quality that McNulty had always admired in her; she always seemed genuinely eager to hear about his day.

'Tough. You hear on the news about that bank that got hit this afternoon?'

'I did, I figured you'd end up with that.'

'You were right.'

'I thought it was strange, that the guy did it in broad daylight and without any sort of mask or anything. I assume you caught him within minutes?'

'I wish. No, this guy, he's...different.'

'Different how?'

‘Well, you said it yourself. He sticks up this bank, in broad daylight, no mask or nothing, witnesses all around. Thing is, not one of them can remember a damned thing about him. The man is like a ghost, he’s so average.’

‘Huh, I see what you mean. Have you got any ideas on what to do?’

McNulty sighed.

‘Not a damned one.’

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The man strolled up the broad marble steps along the front of the bank. The huge, elaborate façade welcomed him as he stepped through the revolving door and entered the building, the deafening silence punctuated only by the occasional sound of a customer whispering in order to be heard over the din. He made his way to the end of the queue and waited for his turn to be served, keeping a wary eye on the paltry few guards positioned around the room. One of them was engrossed in his mobile, another seemed to be asleep. Finally, the man heard himself being called up to the counter. He arrived and slid a note under the screen. The teller, a middle-aged woman with a distinctive scar above her right eyebrow, perhaps from a chickenpox affliction early in her childhood, took a step back and her eyes widened. She had a small brown freckle on her otherwise bright green iris. The man always found that he noticed every tiny distinguishing feature of people he encountered, no matter how insignificant, as though he was vicariously living a life of individuality through them. She looked afraid and he softened his expression in response; she seemed to regain her composure. She stood up and disappeared for a moment, but returned carrying a large satchel. She opened the screen and passed it over, her hands visibly trembling. The man grabbed it and walked out, past the sleeping guard, through the revolving door, down the stairs and away.

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‘Would you like a doughnut, McNulty?’

‘No, thanks, I’m trying to watch my weight.’

‘Don’t worry about it, they’re diet doughnuts.’

‘Oh, then I will have one after all.’ McNulty picked a chocolate number and bit into it as he surveyed the bank lobby before him. His partner had taken a middle-aged female bank teller aside to interview, but McNulty could see from his face that it was proving entirely fruitless. He made his way slowly along the lobby, towards the counter. Running his hand along the wood finish, deep in thought, he noticed a scrap of paper laying on the clerk’s side of the screen. He reached over and grabbed it before scanning it. A bog-standard robbery note, but for one thing: there was a name at the bottom. John Doe. He was playing with them. McNulty threw the piece of paper away in frustration.

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The man sat in his armchair before the television, watching the 24-hour news. His bank job had been the top story of the day. They brought in everyone from criminal psychologists to the winner of a reality show a few years back, in which members of the public competed to eat the most human excrement, for their thoughts on the event, tentatively labelled ‘crime of the week’ by a number of outlets. To the man’s mounting frustration, the anchors continued to say that police had no lead as to who the perpetrator was, despite him putting his name on the note he had handed to the teller. He had been aware at the time that it was perhaps a foolish move, but he had begun feeling an overriding sense of stagnation in his day job, and he was eager for a little extra thrill, even if it meant a risk of capture. He would have to try something else to get their attention.

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‘McNulty!’ screamed the police chief.

‘Sir?’

‘Get in my damned office this instant!’ McNulty duly did as he was told. There were three chairs in front of the chief’s desk; one was for McNulty, the second contained his partner and in the third sat somebody McNulty didn’t know, a police officer of no more than twenty years old. ‘Sit down. Damn all this construction work going on outside, I have to be shouting all the time just to be heard.’

‘What’s this about, chief?’

'You all know what this is about.' McNulty paused.

'John Doe.'

'Damned straight, the bank man. He's a ghost, and I need him exorcised. McNulty, you're heading a task force assigned to catching this guy, along with your partner. This rookie will join you, try to learn the ropes. He's straight out of the Academy, so be gentle with him. Now get outta here.'

As McNulty stepped outside of the chief's office, the sight of the precinct full of fit, in-their-prime police officers filled him with a burning pride in his police force, so unhampered by bureaucracy as it was.

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The man went through the motions; entering the bank, checking on the guards, walking up to the counter, handing the teller a note. The teller dutifully left to fetch a big bag of money. Once the transaction was completed, the man made his way out. He stashed the bag of money in his car, a Focus, and then made his way back into the bank. He leant against the wall and watched the chaos unfurl.

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'Is there anything to go on? Anything at all?' asked McNulty.

'Not a damn thing. Teller can't remember a thing and the prints are the same story as ever.' McNulty thought about this. His eyes scanned the room; the teller sipping from a mug of tea by the table where she'd been interviewed, the guards being chewed out by their supervisor, some guy leaning off to the side. McNulty swore under his breath. Then he watched with indifference as the leaning man get up from the wall and make his way over to the bank teller.

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The man had grown sick of standing as conspicuously as he could in the middle of an active crime scene and not being noticed, so he made his way over to the bank teller, sat behind a small table she had been interviewed a few moments ago. He stood before her and cleared his throat. She glanced up, but no flash of recognition appeared across her face. 'Yes?' she asked. 'I told you people, I don't remember anything about him.' The man felt an irritation welling up inside him as he made his way past the assembled policemen and returned to his car.

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McNulty sat in his study, light pouring in through the partially open door but the room otherwise bathed in darkness. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, having just drawn yet another blank with regards to the bank robberies, the perpetrator of which had now been christened 'the Savage Average' by the media. He reached into the draw under his desk and withdrew the hip flask from within. He looked longingly at it, like a long lost friend, before unscrewing the top and taking a number of deep gulps. The taste of Coca-Cola was refreshing after a hard day's work; McNulty had always kept a novelty hip flask filled with fizzy drinks around, as he had never been one for drink. He jumped as the door swung open and his wife walked in. 'How's it going?' McNulty sighed.

'Not well. I'm just drawing blank after blank, I don't know what to do.' His wife came over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

'I've been thinking it. I think I have an idea.'

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'McNulty!'

'Sir?'

'Get in here this instant!' McNulty did as he was told immediately. The chief was standing, looking out of his office windows. 'How long does it really take to finish road repairs, goddamn.'

'They should be done in a few days, sir.'

'Dammit McNulty, hand in your badge and gun.' McNulty was startled.

'But sir, why?' The chief looked set to blow.

'Why?! So I can send them off to cleaning, of course!' The chief wandered over and pointed at McNulty's badge. 'I can't have my best officer looking scruffy, now can I?' McNulty sighed a sigh of relief.

‘Will do, sir. Did you get my request to hire outside help for the bank robberies detail?’
‘I sure did. If it was anyone else, I wouldn’t hear a word of it, but I trust you. He’s waiting for you down at reception. Now get out of my sight.’
‘Will do, sir. Thanks.’ McNulty got up and turned to leave when he remembered something. ‘Oh, and thank your wife from me and mine for that peach cobbler the other day, it was divine.’
‘I will indeed. You know, I envy you and your supportive wife, McNulty. Mine keeps telling me to leave the force, but I just can’t do it. It gives my life something, you know?’
‘I do. I’m just lucky that my wife is so appreciative of that fact, I suppose.’
‘You lucked out, McNulty. Now go catch me a bank robber.’

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Smith stood before the counter. The police receptionist put down the phone. ‘What can I do for you?’
‘I’m looking for a McNulty, is he in?’ The receptionist tapped some keys into the computer.
‘He is. He should be here in a couple minutes, he knows you’re coming.’
‘Thank you.’ Smith blinked, and the receptionist was now an entirely different person. ‘McNulty?’
‘On his way.’
‘Oh. Thank you.’ Smith blinked, and the receptionist again.
‘McNulty, I presume?’
‘I told you, he’s on his way.’ Before this could continue, a voice came from down the hall.
‘Smith! Come here please.’ Smith looked over and saw a policeman waving him over. He said goodbye to the receptionist and made his way over. He reached McNulty and kept on going, having forgotten who he was making his way over to in the sea of identical police uniforms. McNulty was prepared for this, and called Smith again. They finally met and shook hands.
‘McNulty?’
‘That’s me. Smith?’
‘Aye.’
‘My wife told me about you. I think you might be able to help us solve a case, if you’d come with me.’

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Smith sat behind the table as McNulty and his partner briefed him on what was going on, nodding and smiling. When they were done, the rookie interjected. ‘What was it you said you had, again?’
‘Prosopagnosia. You might know it as face blindness, I think it was in *Arrested Development*. Faces are all indistinct blurs to me, and as soon as I look away, I forget them.’
‘You’re just what we need, Smith’ added McNulty.
‘I’m flattered, but I must say, I’m not sure I fully understand why.’
‘It’s simple. This bank robber can get away with just about anything because nobody can remember his face and analysing footage of him to our databases brings up thousands of possible matches. You, however, can’t remember anyone’s face. You have to rely on other things, too subtle for us to pick up on, such as gait and demeanour. If I’m right about this, he should appear as unique to you as anyone else would to one of us.’
‘I see. And if you’re not right?’
‘Then I don’t deserve this badge, clean or dirty. Now, let’s go over the camera footage of the previous heists and familiarise you with his body language.’

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‘You see that, how he walks with a slightly more pronounced swing in his left shoulder than the right?’
‘No, not at all.’
‘As I thought. You face-sighters always blind yourself to the subtler details.’
‘Face-sighters?’
‘Oh, my apologies. It’s a derogatory name for you people in face-blind culture. I’m not facist though, I have loads of face-sighted friends.’
‘Face-blind culture?’

‘There are dozens of us. Dozens!’

‘Calm down, Smith. Do you think you could pick him out if you saw him walking about?’

‘I’d bet my face-blindness on it.’

‘Excellent. My partner has been dealing with this aspect of the plan, he’ll brief you.’

‘Come here, I’ll fill you in.’

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The man looked up at the bank façade. He sighed; another easy job. It was almost as though they weren’t trying any more. He had resigned himself to being perpetually unchallenged in his bank robberies, his great boon becoming a reviled detriment. He was trapped in a prison of his own unremarkability. He walked through into the lobby, noting the two softly dozing guards, each one older than the other. There was no line.

At least this’ll be quick, he thought. He made his way over to the counter, thinking that the bank seemed strangely empty, considering it was the midday rush. Besides the bank staff and a young couple milling about off to the side, he was alone. He was half-way between the door and the counter when he froze; the hair on the back of his neck shot up. The teller motioned him over, but he remained still, straining his ears for something, he knew not what. He heard a shuffling of feet from behind wall and the penny dropped.

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McNulty was pressing his back against the wall, watching the man in the reflection from a window. His gun was drawn and he held it pointing upward. Suddenly, in a flurry of movement that shattered the eerie stillness that he had grown accustomed to, the man bolted. He reached the doors as McNulty reacted and ran after him. As he made it outside of the bank, he scanned left and right. Nobody stuck out. His partner, the rookie and Smith rushed out and joined him.

‘Smith, where is he?’ Smith shot his eyes left and right, then pointed at man nonchalantly walking away.

‘There he is!’ McNulty looked, but could see nothing about him that reminded him of the man. He shrugged and ran after him, trusting in Smith’s judgement. They rounded the corner as the man darted aside into a nondescript warehouse. They stacked up on the open doorway and caught their breath.

‘I’m gettin’ too old for this shit’, panted his partner. He leaned against the wall and his voice rasped. McNulty eyed his gun; it was practically an antique.

‘You ever fire that thing, old man?’

‘Yeah, once...’

‘Oh. Did you accidentally shoot a kid or something?’

‘No, no, nothing like that. I shot a bad guy and saved the day, it was pretty sweet. Just never had a chance to use it since then.’

‘Looks like you might get one last chance to before your retirement.’

‘Yeah. I can’t believe I’m only two days away from retirement.’

‘Me neither, old buddy. Me neither. Let’s go in, we’re wasting time.’ His partner nodded and they filtered into the warehouse. As their eyes accustomed to the darkness and darted around the decrepit warehouse, their ears tried their best to penetrate the deathly silence. McNulty signalled ahead and his partner made his way over. The others followed. Before long they came to a corridor with two doors, one on each side. McNulty signalled and his partner peeled off right with the rookie in tow. McNulty and Smith went left and found themselves in a vast hall underneath slowly rusting scaffolding. McNulty looked across when a rustling drew his attention. He saw a leg disappear around a corner and a piece of metal clattered to the floor. He motioned to Smith to stay at a distance and ran after. Rounding the corner, he saw a glimpse of the man running up a stairwell, the warehouse ringing with each step. McNulty ran up after him and found himself on the scaffolding, precariously held up by near-gone girders. He ran across, parts of the heavily rusted walkway falling away under his feet. As he was running, a gunshot ran out through the warehouse. His heart sank.

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The man felt his heart pumping as his arm ached from the recoil, the pistol heavy in his hand. He looked over at the policeman as he collapsed, clutching at his chest from which blood was bubbling out of at an alarming rate. The man looked down at the pistol and threw it away in disgust. He heard footsteps and shouting coming nearer and he looked sideways in fear. He was cornered. The only route available was straight out of the window. He swallowed and walked towards it, his feet reluctant but unable to stop. He reached it, ran a hand along the frame, pushed the window open and peered down. He was easily twenty-five feet up; the wind chilled him to the bone as it whipped along the wall. He sighed and looked back. The policeman had stopped moving. The voices and footsteps were growing louder. He looked back at the window and threw himself out of it.

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McNulty rounded the corner just in time to see the man disappear out of the window. He staggered to a stop and stared, wincing as he heard a muffled crack. His eyes fell upon the fallen policeman and he rushed over to the body. As he cradled him, his partner placed a hand on his shoulder. The rookie had been way out of his depth, and had paid with his life. ‘Goddamn’, said his partner, slowly shaking his head. ‘He was anywhere from thirty to forty years away from retirement.’

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McNulty, his partner and Smith exited the warehouse, McNulty carrying the rookie. They heard a hubbub around the corner and walked over. Splattered on the ground was what was partially recognisable as a body, although it had been severely disfigured by the fall. A sizeable crowd had formed and the trio pushed their way through. As they looked over the body, McNulty’s partner leaned towards Smith. ‘Is it him?’ he asked. Smith sighed.

‘There’s no way of telling. Without any body language to witness, I’m just as blind as any of you. We’ll never truly be able to tell if this was our guy or not.’

‘But we’ll know it was, right? You were sure it was him we followed into the warehouse?’ Before Smith could reply, a police car barrelled down the road and stopped beside them. The two policemen stepped out and began ushering the crowd away. They saw McNulty carrying the rookie’s body and called up an ambulance. McNulty stared at the man’s body.

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The rookie’s funeral was scheduled for the next day. McNulty stood alongside his wife, both dressed in black. His partner stood on the other side of him. As the priest droned out the service, McNulty’s partner leaned over to him. ‘How you holdin’ up, pal?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Look, don’t beat yourself up about it, okay?’

‘I’m not.’

‘It wasn’t your fault!’

‘I know.’

‘Don’t blame yourself! His death wasn’t on your hands!’ His partner placed his hands on McNulty’s arms and began shaking him back and forth.

‘I know it wasn’t my fault! I’m entirely squared away with what happened!’

‘Goddamn McNulty, we can’t afford to let a police like you destroy himself over this!’ McNulty brushed his partner’s hands off of him before he could be shook again, acutely aware as he was that they were disrupting the funeral.

‘By all means, Father, go on.’

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McNulty lay in bed with his wife, having returned from the funeral only a couple hours prior. They had been discussing his job. ‘How does what happened to the rookie make you feel?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s just that some of the guys were saying that their wives have been asking them to leave the force for some time, but that after what happened to the rookie, they’ve all gotten spooked and been more insistent. They’re saying things like “I’m tired of waiting until late at night for you to get back, not knowing if you will”.’ McNulty’s wife laughed and stroked his face. ‘I married a police, I know what I’m in for. It’s a terrible thing, what happened to that rookie, but I’m aware that that’s part of

the job, and if you weren't risking your life, other people would be dying. I made my peace with it a long time ago.' McNulty ran a hand through her hair and smiled.

'The guys just don't know what they're missing.'

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Two days passed, and it was time for McNulty's partner to retire. McNulty lounged back on the beach lounger, the sun on his face and a rare beer in his hand, enjoying the retirement party. He watched as his partner received gifts from the guys; twelve watches in a row. He smiled as his partner beamed with each successive one, the avid watch-collector he was. He looked over at his wife talking with the other wives. She was initially the only non-dour one of the lot, but her optimism was infectious and soon all of them were laughing and kicking back, the pall of the rookie's death having been washed away with enough wine. McNulty looked around, seeing the chief and the mayor talking animatedly to each other about who-knew-what. Smith had been talking to the same person over and over for the past hour, thinking them a different person each time. McNulty chuckled to himself. Then he saw someone he didn't recognise, perhaps a police from out of town? As he stared, the stranger's face seemed to fleetingly resemble a number of McNulty's acquaintances, but never settled on one. A gnawing feeling was eating away at McNulty, but before he really noticed it, his wife appeared on his other side and pulled him to his feet to go and dance with her. He stole one last glance back at the stranger, but they were gone. He shrugged and began to dance.