

Hard Shoulder

Chink. Zared Adams lighted his cigarette, dragging his breath over the end as if his life depended on it. Tipping the ash off with the usual jerk of a finger, he exhaled slowly, trying to keep the seductive, noxious tendrils to himself for as long as he could. He was never the one who liked to share.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then, Zared. Remember – the papers are due at 9am sharp!” His colleague’s light-hearted warning drew a dismissive but affirmative nod from him.

“Will do. Later.” He decided to deign him a reply too, just for the sake of civility. Climbing into his well-loved (i.e./id est, worn out piece of scrap) Honda Civic, he let his suitcase settle into the passenger seat before closing the door. Hearing the tapping of knuckles on glass, he rolled the window down and his eyes, up. “9am sharp. I got that already. And have I ever been late on a proposal?”

Nervous chuckles followed. “Well, no, but you don’t want to break your record streak, right? I even think that there’s money riding on this, you know...of course, not that *I* bet on something so lame, but still...you know, it’s good to give a good impression. And I think I heard a rumour about another quick promotion...” His colleague winked in his usual easygoing yet annoying manner.

“Yes, yes. *Now* can I go? If you keep stopping me to remind me of the proposal, I might not even get it done and *then* how would I explain my lateness?” Zared said this jestingly, but he was sure his co-worker would never be able to tell the difference between ‘sarcasm’ and ‘joke’. Not with him, of course. No one could ever tell how he felt, not even his parents. If they could, he wouldn’t have ended up where he was now.

And was he ever so proud of this little secret.

As he expected, the other man laughed, his nostrils flaring with every laugh he let out. It was also done in this high-pitched voice that grated Zared’s nerves, reminding him of the time this teenage skater boy with a black Polo cap and grungy clothes bumped into him and yelled the words Zared didn’t say.

“Okay, okay Mr. Smartass. Bye then!” Zared cringed inwardly before rolling his window back up before turning the engine on and driving out of his parking space.

The nickname ‘Mr. Smartass’ had been shoved onto him by one of his female colleagues who was, he knew, secretly infatuated with him. He could still recall every single roving movement of her peripheral eye on his body, every flirty smile she bathed him in, every single outfit that he could tell she spent hours and hours going over every single combination of clothing she could think of that pranced in his eyes...she kept hovering over him like flies over dung, and after consecutively winning 41 cases, nicknamed him that nonsensical, oxymoron of a name. Nevertheless, it instantly stuck. It was times like those that made him wish that he had been blessed with the abilities to forget and to overlook.

As he was not God (thank goodness), he settled with cursing the Ordinary People he worked with.

Despite this, he found himself uttering a small prayer in false hope before exiting the car park. This was the moment of every workday that he loathed to the core. Suddenly, he was swamped with millions of images, all at once.

Click.

Bustling people jolting one another.

Click.

Their clothes flashing like –

Click.

- the traffic lights turning red yellow green

Click

Advertisements crowding for attention change -

Click

- much too often for his liking

Click

The rush of cars -

Click

- speed past at impatient intervals and -

click click click click click.

No time for the reprise of breath, Zared tried to screw his eyes as much as possible without driving blind. Though he was sure he could do it, the unpredictability of the movement of pedestrians and the possibility of getting arrested and being forced to stay even longer in this hell of a place dissuaded that idea.

He had toyed with several other ideas before, such as making himself blinkers for the ‘smartass’ he was, blindfolding himself (this, he had actually tried, but only when he was alone), having a brain transplant...even the prospect of gouging his eyes out had crossed his flurry of a mind, but if he did that, he would be sent to a mental institution in the blink of an eye.

If only he had the courage to be so selfish. That was also on his list of “Abilities Zared Dreams of Having (But Will Never Have, Which Is Why They Are Called ‘Dreams’)”. What he would give to have a room filled only with white walls and his worn out mind, laughing like a maniac to keep up his pretence (or would it really be ‘pretence’?). Ah, bliss! Bliss! It would be wonderful, he knew, to have that white room and white mind that never changed.

But – there was always a ‘but’ in his situation – but, he had two expectant and hopeful parents to look after. He cursed filial piety like he did with Ordinary People, but he kept it to himself because the Ordinary People seemed to love filial piety. And themselves, of course. At least, they loved the concepts of these things.

Hating each and every red light with a passion that matched their evil grins, he breathed a sigh filled with relief when he could finally turn into the Route 312 highway and head towards the suburbs. Back home, the only true refuge he had nowadays.

He cranked up the speed of his car, anxious to get to that refuge. In the past, he had considered living right next to the place where he worked (he had more than enough to afford an apartment at 'Ville de Vie'), but he changed his mind the moment he remembered about how he would have to get groceries and other products part of his daily life. Paying someone to do it for him wouldn't help either as he wouldn't be able to stand living with someone else, as Ordinary People are so prone to change. Ordering things on the Internet was out of the question as well since browsing through all those pages would be as bad as driving around the city. But the remote suburbs were better – he could shut himself inside all day and no one would disturb him. The scenery hardly changed either, and no one would question him for blacking out the windows. World War II all over again, but this time, it was only for his own protection.

Trying to ignore the scenery that was rushing by (but failing miserably as he inevitably did), he reached into the glove compartment, took out a rectangular piece of black paper and stuck it onto the rear mirror, pressing on the long-memorised places where there was blutack. A snug fit as usual. Zared wished that he could keep the black paper on forever, but there were a lot more policemen in the city. He knew it was dangerous, but it had become habitual by now. Perhaps he would be branded as a hypocrite, being a top lawyer and all. But in his defence, he would probably plead insanity, and even if he did get jailed (which was highly unlikely anyway seeing as how good he was at his job), at least the compensation of a plain, boring jail would be of comfort for him.

But again, the filial piety thing was in the way. So, he just had to make sure that no policeman looked into his car.

Policemen were the only type of Ordinary People that he cursed in a different way. That was because they always reminded him of the childhood dream that he could never really have, not since the day he graduated from grade school at the age of 7. It all happened so quickly; one moment, he was just like any other child, and the next, his parents' sudden realisation of the accursed mind he had caused them to do a 180° turn and bludgeoned him to do everything that they (nor anyone else for that matter) could not, and everything he did not want to do. All that fun he had playing 'Cops and Robbers' with his friends, all that exercising because of the website he read about the requirements of becoming a policeman, every little thing he did to fulfil his childish dream...he remembered every single useless act and sentiment in their entirety and with frightening clarity, so much so that it made him cry on the day he graduated as the top student in Law at Yale.

Everyone had thought that he was overjoyed and being much too modest.

If only he had known where and whom he would end up as, he would have ran away from home a long time ago. But if he could change fate, he would be God, which would be worse than what he was right now. He figured that God must be in His own hell of self-induced loneliness, whereas on earth, at least there were a tiny handful of people who were like him (at least, he clung on to that hope with superglue-tipped Wolverine claws). Too bad that he hadn't met anyone from this handful. Yet.

Which is partly why he chose to become a lawyer, out of the list of careers his parents had showered him with. Someday, maybe he would come across one person who shared his non-existent joys and pains. He would welcome them with tears of understanding before dragging him or her to a bar and drown them both in all sorts of strong spirits. Misery loves company, so why

not? However, for now, he had to survive the long days of arguing every single case he could not forget, driving through the same busy streets and dealing with almost the same Ordinary People who worked with him, knowing every single one of them from the habits they had to the clothes of their daily wardrobes.

Taking the exit towards his sanctuary, he manoeuvred his car in the same way he had for the past 20 years, entering the remote, small neighbourhood that he appreciated so much. The same tall pines reached for the sky whilst the same row of houses greeted his eyes with welcoming familiarity, releasing the tension Zared felt in his shoulders every time he opened his eyes in the morning since the morning after he had gotten his job at the law firm. Pressing the white button of the remote attached to the dashboard, he waited for the garage door to creak open before breathing one last prayer to the lonely God in heaven.

Please, please take away my curse of having a photographic memory.