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Enter, the Clowns

"That's the thing about this city," Carson whispered, "it is only partially visible."

Dane leaned closer because that could not be what his best friend had said to him.

"Huh?" he replied, not whispering.

An older gentleman, who had been half-heartedly reading his newspaper, glanced over at them as the bus wheeled around the corner of 9th and Vine, pulling up with a rough stop in front of the Public Library.

Carson straightened, pressed his lips together to indicate silence, and nodded his buddy off the bus.

"What did you say?" Dane asked again, as they smacked down onto the sidewalk and strolled over to the steps that led to their study group.

"Let's talk about it later," Carson dithered.

"Uh, no - let's talk about it now. Did you say," Dane again leaned towards his friend in a slightly menacing pose, "this city is only partially *visible*?"

"Yeah," Carson admitted softly, lowering his eyes to search for something under his fingernail.

"This city..." Dane reiterated.

"Mmm-hmm, Cincinnati, yep." Carson agreed.

Dane straightened up and stared first at his friend's downturned profile, then up to look at this partially visible town he had lived in all his life. Dane was the optimist of their crowd - always seeing the peachy side of life. This eerie declaration by his best friend had unsettled him.

"I'm not following," he finally admitted. As he had admitted in a thousand other conversations with Carson.

Carson smiled. He had a sweet smile. A very gentle and thoughtful smile, came from a peaceful place that radiated from him, no matter what or when, or where.

Dane felt his lips responding in kind.

Carson looked suddenly into his eyes and pulled him into the library, where other friends were waiting to study economics for the test tomorrow. In their sophomore year at the University of Cincinnati, they had found a group they fit into from their business courses. They moved through the days and nights with them - studying, playing, drinking, dancing, dating, loafing. And occasionally, doing laundry.

It was understood that they would discuss this eccentricity on their hometown's part later.

Joining the group, they were seven. Tipping their heads in various greetings were Dean and Jodi (couple), Wyatt and Kim (couple), and Jarod. Jarod was the only freshman among them. He was kinda brilliant. They all followed his lead in economics, which none of the rest of them liked at all. Dane found this session particularly hard to concentrate on. The way Carson kept

avoiding his gaze told him much, and puzzlement grew into a true case of nerves. Old Jangly Nerves.

Laughter and reading proceeded, followed by arguing about politics and new information on COVID's impact on the economy - two years from its pandemic appearance. A little more homework, then closing with flashcards for tomorrow's test. Flash cards were Jodi's contribution. She loved flash cards.

"Let's go to Bogart's," Wyatt said as they poured out of the library and down the steps.

All agreed, except Dane.

"Nope, Carson has some 'splaining to do." he laughed. "And I would drink too much for my early class."

Carson did not argue - but looked wistfully at his five other friends, as they blew down the street, calling Uber and acting drunk already.

The bus ride home was short, as they still lived on campus. And very silent. It was packed with more people than Carson thought should be there on a Tuesday night. He was not about to engage Dane in this conversation among so many ears lurking nearby.

At home, shoes kicked off, burritos in the microwave, the boys set music rolling around the room and laid back in their favorite armchairs. Dane put his feet up on the coffee table. Carson's mom would turn over in her grave if he did that. He shifted uncomfortably but bit his tongue.

"OK," Dane led, as he bit down on his first burrito, the innards squishing at the corners of his lips.

"Cincinnati is only partially visible to the human eye, what you see is not all you get," Carson stated as though he had already made a long case about it and this was his final, concluding remarks.

"Really?" Dane asked in his most sarcastic drawl. "Where is the rest of it hiding?"

"Do you really want to know, or are you just ready to fight me on this?" Carson purred smoothly.

"I don't even know what made you blurt out such a ridiculous statement in the first place!" Dane responded, burping up chili seasoning.

"Gross," Carson pronounced.

"We were riding to study group and the conversation had been about getting tickets for the Reds this summer. Then you got quiet and informed me: our hometown is only partially visible..."

"I remember what I said," Carson interrupted.

"But, what the heck?" Dane cried, his feet plopping down and his upper body doing that leaning in thing it did when he was upset or perplexed.

"That is when I realized that you were unaware of the fact that only part of this town can be seen, most of the time," Carson explained quickly. "I understood it for the first time in our 15 years of hanging out together! I understood there on the bus - suddenly - because when a big, huge piece of the usually *unseen* city appeared back on Vine Street - and you were looking out the same window I was - you did not comment on it, look surprised, or anything. I thought you would at least smile or something."

"What?" sputtered Dane. "What, what...I don't recall you saying anything about some 'appearance'!"

"That is because I have known this about Cincinnati since I was a baby. I thought you knew too, for some reason. When those circus performers popped out of nowhere, juggling and riding unicycles, and clowning alongside the bus as it took on more passengers... Well, I am used to seeing stuff like that." Carson stopped, a little out of breath.

Dane leaned back with a frown. Shades of Psychology 101 ricocheted around his noggin. He breathed in and out, deeply and on purpose, to focus his thinking.

"Dude," he finally responded, "that is just wrong. Have you told your parents about this?"

"They see it, too!" Carson informed him, crossing his arms over his chest momentarily. Realizing this body language shouted defensiveness, he uncrossed them and laid his hands, slightly trembling, on the armrest.

"Clowns and such?" Dane asked because he could not focus enough to figure out a good next question.

"I was surprised at that too - usually it is just a building that is now there, where a moment before there was an empty lot. Or a street appears, where before there was a field. Sometimes it's animals that pop out of nowhere, a few times people...but they were just normal people and animals fitting into the...into the...environment. Like a cat appearing on your front porch."

"Kitty?" Dane asked. "Kitty is one of the animals that just appeared suddenly, out of nowhere?"

"Yeah - I told you that when we were kids," Carson struggled to stay calm when he realized how badly words had failed them over the years.

"But I thought you meant, he just showed up one day - as all strays do," Dane explained. "Not that he popped out of the netherworld and just stayed."

"They don't always stay," Carson added.

Dane now bolted up, paced around the room, and glanced nervously at Carson. Should he call the - who?

The police? A doctor? Carson's parents? A sigh leaked out of him, as he came back to his armchair and sunk once more into its cushy embrace.

"Well, I don't *know* that they don't stay," Carson started trying to fill in more details to this nonsense. "Because a lot of times, the animals or people just show up when I am away from home - going somewhere. So, I don't know if they disappear again or not. Some of them *might* stay. But I have seen people pop out in the middle of a sidewalk, and once at the playground, look surprised, and pop right out again!"

Carson concluded this statement with a flourish of his hands as though this proved something special about the ultra-secretive side of Cincinnati.

"Is it only Cincinnati?" Dane asked out loud, while still trying to figure out whom to call.

"We don't know," Carson answered. "Dad thinks so, as he travels a lot for work, and has never seen the phenomenon other places. But how can we know for sure?"

"Well, that is the question, isn't it?" Dane agreed. After a steady five minutes of thoughtful silence, he continued: "Dude – you do know I am going to have to tell someone about this if you don't stop pulling my leg, don't you?"

Carson looked at him strangely. "I was thinking the same thing," he replied.

"What do you mean?" Dane wondered at him.

"Dane, every other Cincinnati knows this fact to be true about our city. Only new babies have to learn about it."

"Right," Dane snarled, "then why does no one ever talk about it."

Carson went over and knelt in front of his oldest, dearest friend. He looked sort of sad as he began, "We do, buddy."

Carson put his hand over Dane's right hand and continued. "Your parents came to my family when we first became friends. They talked to my parents - they said they thought you would outgrow it, like a stigmatism or something. But you haven't. So, the last time I was home for a visit, they all shared this information with me. I did *not* believe them, Dane. I stood up for you - but they asked me to watch you the next time an appearance occurred when we were together. And tonight, the clowns. They asked if, when I was convinced you did not perceive the other side of Cincy, that you could not see 'appearances', I would be the one to tell you. They said that you trust me the most."

Dane felt his heart hammering because even though Carson was a joker, he could always tell when he was trying to pull one over on someone. Especially when that someone was himself.

His tongue felt dry, and he thought he heard flies buzzing in the background.

"How about we go home after the test tomorrow afternoon?" Carson said softly and gently. "I will let your folks know you are coming home for a day or two...they want to get you looked at by a specialist. I guess this has happened once or twice before over the centuries."

But Dane had quit listening.

He was staring out of the window at the building across the street. A building that had never been there before. A building that had lights on and a guy coming out the front door carrying packages. The man stumbled on nothing as the revolving door spit him out onto the sidewalk. A green package with a red bow tumbled to the ground at the feet of a young mom, strolling up with her toddler in tow.

She bent to pick it up and handed it back to the poor man, who was looking about him like the characters in Jurassic Park when they first saw the dinosaurs grazing in a meadow. His neck craned up and back, then down and around – then he seemed to get a bead on the woman handing him back his Christmas goodie.

He took it, looked to be thanking her, leaning a little closer to ask her something, when he and the package and the large, towering apartment building disappeared. Poof.

The toddler began to howl out a protest at this tomfoolery. Her mom knelt beside her, whispering in her ear and pointing to the little park that sat where Dane knew it always had. The little girl was nodding her head, wiping her nose on the back of her sleeve. Dane found his head nodding up and down, in sync with the little girl. Mom slipped her hand back into her daughter's and strolled off down the street again. Deciding on a cup of cocoa to smooth things out completely, she entered the corner café.

Dane had never failed a test in his life, but he took a hit in Economics that semester.

And for a few semesters to come.