

Now You See Me
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Marco.

“Shut up, P-P-Polo.”

My teeth clatter in the midnight air as Janice’s blanket slips from my one good hand. At least this overpass blocks the wind, though freezing rain still soaks my clothes. My other arm, the dead one, twists the wrong way and pokes me in the back like a stick. It’s the only thing that doesn’t hurt. I’d move it if I could.

I yawn. My jaw pops and something oozes down the back of my throat.

Stay awake, Marco.

I’ve heard Polo’s voice since grade school, though I’ve never seen him. I’m glad he’s still with me, after yesterday.

“Ok-k-kay.” Someone will find me.

Only if you stop.

He means: Stop being invisible. After yesterday, though, I’m not sure I can. I think they jammed it.

The left side of my face feels heavy and wet, like a leaky hot water bottle. That eye doesn’t work. I go ahead and close the right one, since it’s too dark to see.

My chin drops. I jolt my head upright, but can’t hold it there. Sleep sounds nice. I nod again.

His voice, thin and far away: *First, turn it off.*

I try. But I can’t. I’m helpless. Like that first time...



It’s too bright. And yellow. Like lemons. And loud.

She sets me on the floor with the others. Then She is gone.

Beside me, the lump in a pink onesie hammers the floor with a wooden block. The block has ridges and a red star and glistens with slime. BANG! BANG! BANG! Another lump, this one with hair, makes bird noises. COO. COO.

A fat one spits out something blue and nubby and round. Fat One snatches the soggy block. Pink screams. Birdie turns the color of the block star, and shrieks. Fat One starts banging. My ears hurt.

I know what they're doing: trying to get a Big to notice.

My gut cramps and takes control. One squeeze and I'm sitting in mush that smells like the sticks She uses for fire and smoke. I am warm. This is nice.

Here is a Big. It gazes from above, deciding between us. Please, not me. I like it here. Take THAT one. Make it quiet.

The Big takes Fat One. The block drops to the floor and sticks. Pink Onesie grabs it and hammers. Birdie coos. A bubble of light begins in my mouth. It grows and grows until it surrounds me. It gentles the noise. The Big can't see through it. Can't see me. I'm safe.



Marco...

It's the bubble. It...

Wake up, Marco!

Convulsions take me. My head slams onto the concrete. My crushed arm wrenches. I become pain.

"Polo!" I scream. "Polo!" I wasn't asleep!

You were.

No! I was trying to remember how to pop the bubble. Like you wanted!

From beneath me, a rivulet of blood trickles down-slope. A gust of icy wind burrows under Janice's blanket and crawls up my back like a frozen snake. I can't focus. I can't...

Do it like the first time.

When we met?

Yes. In Crafts. When I first showed you how.

I remember. Crafts.



I sit alone at the round table with a tub of construction paper, glue, round-nosed safety scissors, and crayons. The glue tastes like wet flour but smells like glue. The crayons come in all colors and taste like stale Halloween candy. They make my teeth itch.

I'm supposed to make a turkey. From above and behind, Teacher clicks her tongue, "The boy ain't right."

The recess bell rings. Everybody else lines up at the door as I make myself invisible: close my eyes, relax, blow the bubble. The world turns bright. It's like breathing into a paper bag. It smells like lilacs. I'm gone and it feels good. They go outside and leave me alone—or so I think.

I wish I could stay like this forever. But I can't. When I try, pressure builds up inside, like...

...holding your breath underwater.

The voice is clear and sharp. But when I look, there's nobody. Where is he hiding? One way to find out.

"Marco," I say.

Polo.

He must be invisible too! "I bet I can hold it longer than you."

You're on.

Neither of us speaks for a long time. I'm getting dizzy as the pressure builds and builds in my head. This is what it's like when Daddy is home and I don't want him to see me and he waits and waits and I'm underwater and I need to breathe but if I do...

You'll drown.

I lose control and the bubble bursts. Everybody can see ME now. But I still can't see HIM. He's good at this!

I look everywhere; under every table, in the closet, under Teacher's desk. Nothing. How does he...?

Do it? Easy. Stand still and listen.

I do. I hear a hum. Like bees and rain.

That's the sound their eyes make. They're like bats. But there's a secret window in the bubble. Shut it and they can't find you, but you can't breathe. Open it all the way and there you are. Open it just a little, and they can't see you but you can still...

...breathe! But they can't see me!

Exactly. Try it.

So I do. I wrap myself in the bubble again, then grope for the window. And there it is. When Teacher returns, she can't find me. I raise the sash, little by little, to let more of the hum in—and suddenly, she's looking straight at me.



I'm back under the overpass—shattered, cocooned in my bubble. The window is there, but it's stuck and I'm too exhausted to force it. I need to rest.

Not yet.

Hang on, Polo. What if the first person to see me doesn't WANT to help? What if a shark sees me first? And it's hungry?

Hungry?

Yeah, like in high school. Open mouths, zits, hand under her shirt, hand down his pants... Chewing on each other's faces... Feeding...

Like Odie?

Yeah. Like Odie...



Sophomore year. World Lit. Like Crafts, but with books.

We're talking about a guy named Odie See-us. He and his men get trapped in a one-eyed giant's cave. The giant grabs two of Odie's pals, splatters their brains on the wall, and swallows them whole. Odie wants revenge. He decides to poke the giant's eye out with a sharp stick, then run away.

I can't believe this crap. If it were me, I'd go invisible, leave my friends safe in the boat and take whatever I want. Easy. But not Odie. Each day, he whittles some more, and each night the giant eats two men. Once the skewer is ready, Odie gets the giant drunk, blinds him, and sails away with what's left of his crew.

The giant yells after them, "Who are you?" Odie answers, "Nobody!" The giant's friends come to see what he's yelling about. He says, "Nobody blinded me!" So they have a good laugh, "Then stop your bitching!" But the giant's daddy is a god and he saw everything. So Daddy slowly tortures Odie and kills what's left of his friends.

If it were me, none of that could have happened. If god can't see you, you don't have god problems.

I leave school to live on the streets. School is too much like...well, like being trapped in a cave with idiots and hungry monsters.



As opposed to huddling here under an overpass, freezing your ass off and worrying about sharks?

I'm better off where the monsters can't see me, no matter how many eyes they have.

Angels can't see you, either.

You're wrong about that. Remember the time I walked naked down the sidewalk and nobody even noticed? Except for...

...the lady cop.

The lady cop. She marched straight up, cuffed me, and took me to a "facility." She saw me, plain as day.

The nurses there saw you, too.

Yeah. The eyes on some police officers and nurses must hum wicked loud. Strong enough to push right through my bubble.

Some of them are monsters, you know.

Yeah, but some aren't. And the good ones can see me, like I am. An angel is just as likely to see me first as a monster.

I probe my teeth with my swollen tongue. Loose fragments dangle from ragged gaps. I lift Janice's blanket and my shirt. Underneath, my ribs cave inward, like a bowl. A purple cloud spreads on my skin where they kicked and kicked and kicked. I touch my ear and my finger squashes in, like it's a rotten orange. My hand comes back covered with...

What's that?

Bloody oatmeal? Smells funny, too. Like wheat paste. "Head's b... b... busted."

No wonder you can't hear the hum.

Something in my head pushes out, as if trying to squeeze through the cracks. I can't breathe. I clutch Janice's blanket like a life rope. I shudder. "What if I can't... can't... can't..."

Calm down, Marco. Calm down. Maybe you're right. Maybe one of those seeing angels will find you first.

An empty plastic bag spins in the breeze below. The stuff in my mouth tastes like clay and salt and copper pennies. The air smells sweeter, like the rain stopped. Dawn must be closer, though everything's black to me.

"Polo?" I ask. "What if everyone—monster, angel, ordinary—what if everyone is like me? Has the ability to go invisible and back again? What if they suddenly found out? Would they look out for one another? Worry less about being seen and more about seeing?"

Or try even harder to hide?

I swallow. It feels like thumbtacks all the way down. My body convulses again, clenching like a fist. Deep inside, lightning explodes, burns then freezes. I snug Janice's blanket tighter. It doesn't help.



It's yesterday. I'm back in my alley. Three sharks with baseball bats are circling. They look like high schoolers. I have my bubble out, but they see me anyway.

But they don't see Janice. She's behind them, buried in trash bags and cardboard boxes, watching. When they start in on me, she flinches but stays still. My arm crunches, muffled, like bare feet on broken glass. I smell salt and taste ozone. The big one focuses on my skull, while his buddies stomp on my ribs and stomach.

EYES ON ME, I scream silently. I'd make sounds if my mouth worked.

Janice. I can't let them see her. She needs my shadow.

The tall one twists the handle of his bat into my eye socket. The bones shatter like popping knuckles. My eyeball squashes into the back of my skull.

Janice... I stretch out with everything I am. She's the last thing I see when I pass out.



When I come to, they're gone. So is Janice. But she left her blanket.

"Hey, Polo."

I'm here, Marco.

Why? Why do they...

They're bored.

Not evil?

Nobody is THAT evil.

Nobody! I guess I should stop my bitching.

The rain begins.

I need to hide, before they come back. The overpass. The streetlight's busted. I can hide there.

The rain starts to freeze as I drag my body along the alley with my working arm.

After an eternity, I'm here. I crawl up the incline and wedge into the gap at the top. It's dark as a cave. Hail clatters in the distance. I smell something dead.

I still have Janice's blanket. That's something.



The Overpass.

Marco.

I sigh, "Polo."

It's OK to sleep now.

Something crawls over my stomach. It tickles. Rat? Spider? At least I'm not alone.

You were never alone, Marco.

Yeah. I guess not.

Close your eyes.

Eye. There's only one, remember.

Eye, then.

You're smiling, aren't you?

Yes. Sleep now.

It doesn't hurt anymore, Polo. It's so quiet! I'm finally warm, too. Under Janice's blanket. My guardian angel.

I'll watch out for her, Marco.

Thank you. For everything.

Good night, Marco.

Good night, Polo.

