

Author's note: This story involves a condition called visual form agnosia, and is mainly built up from what I gleaned from a vision science paper, and not from any actual interactions with a person with such a condition. As such, it is shaky on research, but if I am wrong about something, I would be happy to know more.

G.

It is Friday night.

To say the truth he doesn't really believe Friday night is any different from any other night of the week. It is a predominantly American thing, this, of "going out" on Friday nights, though it is high time he caught a movie in the theatres or spent some time in the book store. He is mildly bored of the office he sits in, although it is cosy and during the day the sunlight floods in in hues of gold and orange and crimson and although he has been given two big monitors and one of those ergonomic keyboards that make typing so much easier.

He is mildly bored nevertheless, because he is the only one there at the moment, and looking out of his window he can see that the night sky is clear and the full moon has drenched everything in a cool shade of white. Seven stories below the city is slowly coming to life, and if he goes to the window and looks down he can see well dressed couples hand in hand going to their dinner dates and groups of people in various states of inebriation and enjoyment standing about below the streetlights talking of all the things that happened that week.

Bah, humbug, he thinks and turns away. He is not really interested in going to bars or clubs, and although that puts his social life almost at zero, he doesn't really mind because he likes what he is doing now anyway. Besides, there is work to be done. The deadline is close, and he has a major experiment to run tomorrow, one he has never really run. His work has mainly revolved around programming computers, and now that he has to actually perform an experiment on a human being he feels both wonderfully excited and extremely nervous.

Besides, it was hard getting G. to come. He knew G. only through psychology papers and articles and books, and in fact till about a week ago he wasn't even sure she existed. It took several meetings with the psychology faculty for him to realize that yes, G was indeed a real person, that yes she indeed had that curious lesion in her head that had made her suddenly one of the most revealing studies in human perception, and yes indeed, a meeting could be arranged with her. They stared rather disdainfully at him however, and they did not believe him at all when he said that he had a computational model that could explain the curious symptoms that G. displayed. He guessed it was normal: although AI in general had drawn a lot from studies of human perception, especially from studies on people such as G., it was no secret that AI systems performed way below human performance, and to say that he had built a model that could work as well was fantastic to say the least.

No, no, he had to shake his head every time this was explained to him. You don't understand, I don't have a computational model for human vision, I just have a model that I think makes the same mistakes she does. But notwithstanding his success or failure in explaining his work, they would always be astonished when he said he wanted to do some psychophysical experiments on G. It was as if it was some sort of turf war, he thinks, annoyed. Well, why can't I do my own

experiments?

But for better or for worse, he had managed to schedule a few sessions with G. He was surprised that she had agreed though, for he was pretty sure all these psychologists had completely bored her with their whole slew of experiments upon experiments. He would like to know why she agreed to his own experiments; on phone she had said nothing of her motives: “Sure, I would love to.”

As he locks the door of his office that night and goes back, he cannot contain his excitement for tomorrow. Already he has cross-validated his computational model with several findings in the literature and they all work out. If they are in line with G’s curious abilities too, which has been a major deal-breaker for every model proposed till now, then this might be the most exciting discovery yet. Already, as he opens the door to his apartment, he is thinking of the title to the paper, the first figure. He imagines people’s reactions to the paper; his mind conjures up images of the top researchers in the field, astounded. It would be a major discovery, he says to himself, but “major” sounds like an understatement. Ground-breaking, more like.

As he lays on his bed and starts to go to sleep, he suddenly wonders what G’s actual name is.

When G. walks in the next morning, he is surprised at how young she is. Somehow reading all the papers he had thought that she would be an old woman, but of course scientific research ages faster than people, and the woman who walks into his office is no more than 30 years of age, and probably only a few years elder to him. She is not very tall, dark complexioned with black curly hair. She is slightly plump but her immaculate dressing sense easily hide any inelegance, and her thick rimmed glasses complement her round face.

Inspite of her strange disability she comes across as jovial and she shakes his hand with a force and assertion that he is not used to. There is an awkward silence as they stand in his office.

“Anamika”, she says. “Pardon?” he asks, confused.

“Anamika. That’s my name. It’s usually what people ask me first.”

“Oh, oh right”, he blunders. “Sayed” he says. “Is my name”, he adds, as an afterthought.

She laughs; an easy laugh. “You seem to be intimidated by me.”

“Yes”, he admits. He runs his hand through his hair, trying to calm himself down. “For some reason I wasn’t expecting you. I mean, I had a different mental picture of you.”

“What did you imagine me to be?” She cocks her head slightly, making the question sound more serious than it is. Or so he thinks.

“You know. An old lady”, he replies nonchalantly. She laughs again. “Wow, that’s new.”

He wonders what the proper etiquette is. He feels it inappropriate to start the experiment immediately, and besides he is curious about her condition. Her appearance, of course, betrays nothing out of the ordinary: her injury is to the brain, to parts of the visual cortex. But then, her mannerisms are also quite normal; isn’t she affected by her inability to recognize everyday objects? Did she recognize the door knob when she came in? Does she recognize all these things that are strewn on his desk: his laptop, his notebooks, various odds and ends of the projector

screen?

She has found her way to the window and is staring intently at the deep blue sky. It is a clear afternoon and the warm sun has heated up the glass, she touches the glass to feel the warmth. "Could you tell me a bit more about your condition?" he blurts out. "I am sorry, I am not really a psychologist", he adds, hoping it isn't too rude.

She smiles. "I thought you would know already".

"Yes, but it is hard for me to imagine", he replies. "What I know, from reading all those accounts of you, is that you have a hard time recognizing things, or saying what they are, but then you have no problem whatsoever when you have to manipulate things. Your eyes and your visual system inform you how to perform actions in the world, but they don't tell you what things are." He pauses. She does not reply. "But then, doesn't it cause problems in your everyday life?"

"It does", she says, running her hand over a chair in front of her, "but I have had this problem for the past 10 years, and I had the injury as a child. You'll be amazed at what you can learn".

"Learn?"

"Yes. I have learnt to use my hands to tell me what something is. For instance, I can't look at this thing here and say what it is" she says, pointing to a notebook on his desk. "But then", she reaches out and her hands anticipate perfectly where the notebook is, and her fingers curl in anticipation of holding the notebook. "I reach out and know that this is something rectangular, and it has thin pages and so on, and then it doesn't take me long to figure out that it is a notebook."

"You do all that every second of your waking life?" he asks, astounded. "I mean the whole deduction thing."

She shrugs. "Not really. As I said, eventually you learn and then it becomes quite automatic. I have used notebooks so many times now that it is almost as if I only have to think about reaching out to that thing on the table and I know instantly that it is a notebook."

He is amazed. But then, he should probably have expected it. The human brain is a complicated enough machine that it can continue to work in the direst of circumstances, and what G. was faced with was hardly a minor blip.

Wait, what was her name again?

Anamika. Yes, Anamika.

It is late and he is tired. And he is frustrated. He hadn't thought this through. He should have realized that she would have grown adept at going around in the world in spite of her deficit: All the stimuli he has shown her are of day-to-day objects, and she is surprisingly good at them. He has asked her to keep her hands behind her back to prevent her from reaching out, he has tried presenting the images to her very fast till her eyes ached and she pleaded him to stop. But to no avail; she is still much better at recognizing things than he expected, and his computational model is struggling to keep up.

He is worried because the submission deadline is tomorrow. He can't hope to redo all the experiments, and besides, she is only here for a couple of days. If this was just a program to be

run, he could stay up all night just running all the experiments. But he can't force this experiment on her all night. She is already tired. Her answers are not even consistent any more. It is a disaster as of now. He shakes his head.

"Let's do this tomorrow", he tells her. She nods, rubbing her eyes. "What's the time?" she asks. "7" he replies, getting up. "Do you want to get dinner?"

They walk in silence for a while. He is stressed out, and not really interested in conversation. He feels the pressure of time on his shoulders. He wants to convince himself that this deadline is not important, that he can submit his work later, but his nerves continue to stay on edge.

"Do you read?"

He is surprised by the question, especially in the manner it is phrased. It sounds almost like asking, "do you drink?"

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"Books" she replies. "Novels. I guess I wanted to ask if literature is your thing."

"I do read a lot, or used to at any rate. Now it's mostly sporadic; usually the only time I read nowadays is when I am on a flight beside a baby who can't stop screaming."

She laughs. "That is sad though. You should read more often."

He nods slowly. "I like reading" she says, then more softly: "I love words. Language. Literature. I used to be an avid reader you know", she says, it seems more to herself than to anyone else, "when I was a child. Before this injury happened. And when it slowly became clear what had happened to me, of what I could or could not do, it was words that I missed most sorely. And I still miss them. You see, I can learn my way out of recognizing staplers and notebooks and cars and buses, but I can't learn to recognize words. I can't reach out to them. They just sit there now, illegible ink stains on paper, but they seem senseless, without meaning."

She pauses for a while, and they walk in silence. "I started listening to audiobooks then, but it is not the same. You can't find audiobooks so easily, especially in bookstores. You can't go to bookstores and leaf through old forgotten books, or smell the paper, or feel the leather. You can't hold it in your hands."

She makes a motion with her hands, as if she is turning imaginary pages.

"Why don't we go to a bookstore, and I'll read out to you", he says. Her face lights up. "I'd really love that!" she exclaims.

A part of him whispers about the time crunch he is in. As they walk into the night however that voice dies out in the midst of the clamour of words.

They stay in the book store till it closes. They sit down together on the floor in a corner. She goes and gets a bunch of books; they have no pattern to them except that they are all fiction. Some of them are leatherbound classics, some of them more recent bestsellers, some are even cheap sleazy thrillers he has never heard of. Each she opens at a random page and hands to him, and he begins reading out loud. She moves her lips as she hears him speak, as if she is imagining herself reading. Sometimes she asks him to pause and read it again, and he does so, slowly this time,

savouring the words as he says them.

Soon they are laughing together, or silently mulling over, or hotly debating the meaning of the words. Neither feels the couple of hours slip by, and when the attendant finally comes to tell them that the bookstore is closing, he feels sad that they have to leave, and he is surprised at his own sorrow. It was but a couple of hours. Why does he want this to continue forever?

They walk in the night in silence. Random passages he read just a while back run through his mind, and bring with them a whole slew of emotions. He is suddenly conscious that he is gently smiling to himself, and he frantically looks at her, to see if she noticed.

She hasn't and she is deep in thought herself. What is she thinking? he wonders.

"Do you have many friends?" she asks suddenly. He considers the question. "Not many close friends, I would say. A large number of acquaintances, yes. What about you?"

"Not many" she says, and leaves it at that. Then, "do you want to be one of them?"

He laughs nervously. "Whatever does that mean?"

She sighs. "You see, I can't recognize faces either. So the only people I remember faces of are just my close friends and family."

"How can you recognize their faces?"

She closes her eyes and runs her hand over his face. Slowly. Her fingers alight on his eyelids, his cheekbones, the bridge of his nose, the lips.

She opens her eyes and smiles broadly. "Two or three times and I am done. And every time I see you I'll try reaching out to you, and then I'll know."

For some reason he finds himself speechless.

The next day he has his breakthrough.

"Faces", he tells her proudly, when she comes in. "You will have a hard time with faces you haven't seen before".

The excitement is tangible. He knows in his head that this experiment would work, and the knowledge and the excitement make him extremely focussed. Within a few hours he has the experiment set up, and by evening the experiment is done. All is as expected. He has his results.

The deadline is tonight. He has to write the whole paper, and he has hardly a few hours. But then, the results are all in. He practices in his head what he has to write over dinner; he doesn't notice that their dinner is incredibly quiet. When he comes out of the restaurant he starts walking straight to the lab.

"I am leaving tomorrow", she calls out. He stops and turns.

She is standing against the backdrop of the sunset. Her face is set ablaze by the reddish hue of the sun, and behind her clouds are scattered in angry streaks of orange and gold. For a moment, he wonders suddenly how much he knows about this person standing in front of him, and how little he knew about her hardly a day or so ago.

He thinks of going with her to the bookstore again today. Or at least walking her home. It is late though, and he has work to do. Can't it wait, her eyes seem to ask, although he can't really see them against the brightness of the sun. No, no it can't, a voice inside his head answers.

"When do you leave tomorrow?" he asks as a compromise.

"Early in the morning. At 6."

That is extremely early. This is probably the last time he will see her.

He walks up to her. "Goodbye", he says. "It was great meeting you".

"You too", she says. "You should read", she repeats. He nods.

"Thanks for your help."

She turns and walks away. In a frantic revelation, he wonders if she will remember his face. He wants to call out, but she is already too far.

He has submitted his paper. He is proud of it. He reads it again, and imagines all the excitement it would cause. He tries to think of what reactions it would evoke.

He tries to imagine what G. would think. Not G. Anamika. Then he realizes she would need someone to read it to her.

He feels strangely hollow. He is still in his office. He tilts back his head and closes his eyes. He remembers the bookstore, all those pages they read. Laughed about, mulled over. He thinks of her running her hand over his face. He is suddenly reminded of a passage that they had read and reread several times.

*... but today you get a telegram,
from the heart in exile
proclaiming that the kingdom*

*still exists,
the king and queen alive,
still speaking to their children,*

*- to any one among them
who can find the time,
to sit out in the sun and listen.¹*

It is night again, and the room is again empty. No, not empty. It is filled with the rancid odour of broken, unspoken dreams.

1 Poem by Tony Hoagland