

Excerpt from

how to keep everyone happy

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Why were two cops talking to Professor Robinson? *Two*. Like one needed backup. Professor Robinson looking frantic, like a cornered animal. All three of their breaths visible in the freezing morning. A light dusting of snow under their feet.

James watched from the sidewalk outside Teppinger Hall. It was the first day of spring semester 2015, his last semester in college, and he didn't want to be late to class—he was never late to anything—but it was Professor Robinson's class. Professor Robinson had been his mentor for all four years in the graphic design program at the University of Kansas. He was maybe the most influential person in his life outside of Valerie—no, Professor Robinson was probably more influential, really.

Why were two cops talking to Professor Robinson?

One of the cops was writing quickly, flipping pages in his notebook. The other just stood there, frowning, his right hand on his gun holster. They were both a foot or two away from Professor Robinson, as if ready to grab him, should it be necessary.

Students were rushing around campus in the twenty-degree weather, many absorbed in their cell phones and other devices. Some glanced over, curious what was happening, but many kept moving. It was really, really cold out. But James felt almost glued to the sidewalk, wondering what was happening to his teacher, to this person who had taught him practically everything about design, aesthetics, and the creative process.

Professor Robinson was wearing a long black coat, black boots, dark jeans, and a furry hat that seemed Russian in the vibe it gave off. He was tall and late thirties or early forties. He looked like a guy who should be in a new wave band, stabbing the keys and never smiling on stage. Most of the other students called him by his first name, Xavier—he seemed to prefer it—but James had always kept it formal, *Professor Robinson*, despite the fact they had hung out outside of class several times, including seeing the reunited Pixies last year, after which James's ears had rung for days, as well as regular meet-ups in Professor Robinson's cramped

first-floor office, where they shot the shit or discussed the intricacies of design, James usually leaving further excited.

James had dreams of being a great designer and really doing something with his creations (important ad campaigns, designs people used in everyday life, things people loved holding and looking at), and Professor Robinson was going to help him do that—or at least that's what James had always assumed.

One of the cops leaned toward his shoulder and spoke into the walkie-talkie thing.

Professor Robinson talked quickly and raised his hands in an almost “I surrender” look, before dropping them back to his sides.

James knew he should walk inside—it was rude to stare—but he stayed put some twenty feet from Professor Robinson and the two cops, the heavy backpack over his right shoulder acting like an anchor. He had his laptop, multiple notebooks and sketchpads, numerous pens and pencils, headphones, chargers, flash drives—he was always prepared, never one to have to ask to borrow a pen or anything else. People usually asked him.

And now one of the cops was speaking quickly, Professor Robinson staring back, slack-mouthed, his usual confident facial expression gone as he listened and nodded glumly. And then he peered up and spotted James, his eyes squinting in recognition, his head slightly rotating as the internal processing system in his body computed who was staring at him from a distance.

James jumped and hurried toward the building, joining the herd of students shuffling inside, thankful for the cover of a crowd, the hazy cold morning encasing them all, the chance at anonymity.

But of course Professor Robinson had seen him watching. Hadn't he?

James jetted up the stairs to the fourth floor. He still didn't want to be late, even though his professor clearly would be.

He would act like he had seen nothing, like it was no big deal—because it probably wasn't. Talking to cops didn't mean you were “under arrest,” a “person of interest” for something. Not necessarily. And what could they possibly suspect Professor Robinson of doing anyway?

In room 4332, James spotted Kenny, Leslie, A.J., Jackie, Vance, and others. They had all been in the program together and would soon be graduating. Only four more months. Four months. It was exciting. It was happening.

“Hey,” he said, nodding at Kenny. “How's it going?” he said to Jackie.

They were all talented in different ways. James was particularly interested in web design but also traditional print advertising. Leslie was the one most up on apps. Vance, illustration. Jackie, letterpress. Kenny was more drawn to graffiti art—tagging—and brought that sensibility to his work. A.J. was . . . well, he was probably the weakest of them. He had considered switching to something else last year—maybe accounting? Engineering?—but when he asked James's advice, James, never one to want to hurt anyone, urged him to continue in graphic design and finish his degree, even though he knew A.J. didn't seem to quite have *it*.

James grabbed a seat and took out a notebook and pen. He wrote the date at the top of the page. Underlined it. Drummed on the page.

He was still feeling . . . something. Nervous maybe? Jumpy.

“Did you watch the basketball game on Saturday?” he asked Jackie in the seat next to him just to talk about something, to try to get his mind on something else.

“Yep. Always nice to whip Texas’s ass.” Her eyes remained glued to her iPad. Scrolling, scrolling.

James underlined the date again.

“Are we still on for Friday at the Rewind?” he asked Vance a couple seats away. “That band you like is playing? Marble List?”

“Hell yeah. Pumped.” Vance began practically bouncing in his seat, bobbing to something. “Gonna be sweet.”

Kenny turned around from the front row. “You guys like that band? Come on. Really? Their little thrift store suits? How they all wear sunglasses on stage and say ‘groovy’? Haha, gimme a break.”

“Nah, nah, nah. You gotta give them a chance,” Vance said. “I see them as kind of a throwback—”

“*Every* band is a throwback band these days,” Kenny said. “DJ Thud is spinning at the Horseshoe. You know that’s gonna be better. At least more women.”

“I’ll be there,” Leslie said.

“You don’t really count,” Kenny said and deflected a fake punch from Leslie.

“But Thud just spins throwback music,” Vance said. “How is that any better? And, like, twenty seconds of it before switching to another song. It’s disrespectful to the music.”

“It’s obscure stuff. It’s rare,” Kenny said. “He creates, like, sound collages.”

“It’s rare cause no one wanted it,” Vance said. “And why is obscure music immediately better? Oh, he ‘dug’ it out of a crate at a record store. *Ooo*, so special.”

“Maybe we could go to both,” James said. He always had little to add to the DJ vs. Band Authenticity Debates that Kenny and Vance had on a regular basis.

“Hmm.”

“We’ll see.”

Kenny and Vance returned to their phones for entertainment. James considered the page in front of him. The date was still on it, with two straight lines underneath.

Had any of them seen the cops talking to Professor Robinson? If so, no one was saying anything—but James wasn’t going to. He wasn’t the type to spread rumors, gossip.

9:30 hit—the official start time of class. Then 9:31, 9:32.

James looked at his watch, even though the clock on the wall was right in his line of vision.

“Where the fuck is he?” Leslie said. She was now wearing large black headphones, from which loud music leaked out—probably At the Drive-In or Mastodon, two bands she seemed to listen to constantly. “This is the right room, right?”

“It said 4332 on the website,” James said.

“If he’s not here in,” Kenny said, “. . . let’s give it three more minutes, and then I’m gettin’ out of here and going back to bed.”

The other students murmured in agreement. Fidgeted in seats. Tapped pens against desktops. Scrolled on devices.

A.J. spoke up, “You guys wanna get breakfast at the Dive? Like if he’s not here in two—”

“But I think the rule is to give it fifteen minutes,” James said. “The departmental policy.”

A few chuckles sounded in response.

“I’d say five minutes is more than enough,” Leslie said, removing her headphones but not bothering to pause the music.

James looked at his watch. 9:35 a.m. He sighed, embarrassed at his continuous inability not to sound like a total teacher’s pet, an obsessive rules follower. It seemed at times that he was the only student at KU who didn’t drink alcohol until his twenty-first birthday, until it was legal for him to do so. It’s not that he was such a goodie-goodie, but those *were* the rules, so . . .

And he didn’t even like that band Vance was always raving about! Marble List—they did sound like a total sixties rip-off, and they were not good. He was just trying to be nice. He’d have to see what Valerie wanted to do on Friday anyway. She was more opinionated, and more vocal with her opinions. She would’ve gladly jumped in the Marble List vs. DJ Thud discussion, but from a gender politics/cultural appropriation angle, like, was it acceptable that one of the guys in Marble List, a white guy, wore a fake Afro on stage, or that DJ Thud never seemed to spin any songs by female artists where they weren’t making sex noises?

James hadn’t seen Valerie since leaving for winter break a few weeks ago, but he would later today. Couldn’t wait.

9:37 a.m.

“Dude’s probably hungover,” Vance said.

“That’d make two of us,” A.J. said.

“Three.”

“Seven.”

Laughter.

Professor Robinson was one of the more fun graphic design teachers in the program, prone to being spotted at a bar or good concert around town. Unmarried, very liberal, often hovered over a cup of coffee at one of the hipper coffee shops in town, jotting down things in a notebook. He was popular and talented. When he talked to you he made strong eye contact. He seemed always “in the moment.”

“First day of class and already slackin’,” Kenny said.

“Tsk tsK tsK,” Leslie said. She finally paused the music.

“*Thank* you,” Kenny said.

“Should we take bets on his excuse?” Vance said. “Five dollars says, ‘My alarm didn’t go off cause my phone died.’”

James slouched down lower in his seat—should he just tell them? He wouldn’t be outing Professor Robinson exactly. But no, no, he probably shouldn’t. It was really none of his business.

At 9:40, Professor Robinson hurried into the room, his cheeks red, his face sweaty.

The class groaned.

James sat up straighter.

“Thought we got the day off, Xave,” Leslie said.

Professor Robinson stopped by the front table to put down his bag. His hands looked shaky. His jacket was half unzipped.

“You okay?” A.J. said.

Professor Robinson fumbled with his bag, struggling to get it open. When he finally did, he pulled out some papers, many of which were slightly crumpled. He peered up at the class.

“Hey, guys—yeah, sorry. Crazy morning. But boom, we’re all here? Yep, looks like it. Looks like it. Okay.” He exhaled. “Just give me a sec.”

“You’re getting old, Xave,” Leslie said.

“Ha,” Professor Robinson said. “It sucks, lemme tell ya.”

From a side pocket on his bag, he extracted a tall thermos, which, with its titanium exterior, resembled some sort of World War I bomb, the kind soldiers threw before ducking in a trench. He took a long sip. He checked something on his phone, then put it back in his pocket. He sat on the edge of the table at the front of the room, the table creaking under his body.

“Sorry I’m late. But let’s get right into it. Um. Yeah, so this is it, guys,” Professor Robinson said. “Portfolio: the last, perhaps, most important class of your undergraduate career. Crazy, huh? It’s nothing scary, but this is it.”

“We’re gonna miss you, Robs,” A.J. said.

Professor Robinson scratched at his forehead. “I’ll miss you guys too, but hopefully I’ll be seeing your work, y’know, on a can of Pringles or something. Actually, no. Maybe not Pringles. Those are, like, the consolation prize of chips.”

The class laughed.

James had taken every class of Professor Robinson’s he could. When he had heard Professor Robinson was teaching Portfolio this year—the professors rotated who taught it—he’d felt beyond psyched. Professor Robinson had most helped James’s work grow through college, so it seemed fitting to cap off this last semester with his guidance. Because the portfolio was really, really important. It was the calling card of designers, like a headshot and acting reel for an actor, a demo for a musician. James had long been compiling his; now it was about perfecting it. Getting everything to its best. Removing the weaker pieces. Arranging it just right. Getting it so he could land a great job.

Professor Robinson passed out a syllabus, and James grabbed his with eagerness. “All right,” Professor Robinson said, sitting on the front table again. “So we’re meeting just once a week, guys. We gotta make our time count. Today we’ll do an overview of portfolios and look at some examples. Next week, I want you all to bring in at least three pieces you think you might include in it.”

Groans.

“Print ’em out. On good paper. Don’t just open your laptop and show me. We’ll get to a digital portfolio later.”

James raised his hand. “Can we bring in more if we have more picked out?” As the words left his mouth, he realized how much he sounded like a kiss-ass. Again.

A few church laughs rippled through the room. A couple classmates smirked James’s way.

“You’re already done, aren’t you?” Kenny said, sighing and dropping his hands on his desk with a *plop*. “And let me guess, it’s perfect?”

“Figures,” Leslie mumbled.

“Well, I . . .” James lowered his hand, which he had kept raised for some reason. “I’ll, I’ll just bring three. Ha, yeah.” He smiled and nodded, showing his agreement with the rest of the class that it had been a dumbass question.

“Yeah, just bring three,” Professor Robinson said. “You’re the one I’m least worried about unlike *some* people.” He lowered his eyes to A.J.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” A.J. said. “I’ll bring one.”

“Three,” Professor Robinson said.

“Ah. Yeah, okay, three.”

“Maybe your son can help you,” Leslie laughed.

That was the other thing about A.J.—he was a single dad with a two- or three-year-old son, who mostly lived with his mom in Nebraska but occasionally spent weekends with Dad, the struggling college student.

“Is he good with Adobe software?” Kenny said, laughing too.

“Or James,” Leslie said, “just give him some of your shittier ones, since you have so many already.”

“Ha. Yeah,” James said.

The truth was, if sharing designs were allowed, James *would* offer some of his weaker ones to A.J. The guy could use the help. But no, no. That’d be unethical.

After class, James walked with Professor Robinson to his office, like they had done a hundred times before.

“Tell me,” Professor Robinson said as they navigated among students moving down the busy Teppinger halls, some with books clutched to their chests, others talking or texting on phones, many with headphones on or earbuds inserted into their ears, “you *are* done with your portfolio already, aren’t you?”

Well, so he worked hard. He had twice won the Graphic Design Student of the Year Award at KU and was hoping to win it again this year. Last summer he had received a much-coveted internship at the top agency in Kansas City. His teachers frequently praised him. Singled him out as an example of a great designer and student. All things that earned him respect from his classmates, as well as a reputation as a bit of an overachiever. He didn’t mean to be such a brown-noser. It was a reputation that had dogged him his whole life. He just really loved graphic design, and why not try to be the best at it?

“No, not quite,” James said. “But I have been thinking about it. I guess I got a little bored at my parents’ over winter break.”

“I just want to make sure there’s any point in you taking this class outside of it being required, but okay, good. Good, good.”

They stepped down to the first floor, which was lined with faculty offices and a copy room. The hall, though lit, was still dark due to the entire floor being underground, and the temperature felt like it could freeze water.

James had had no experience with the state of Kansas, its weather, its culture, its anything, before enrolling at the university. He had grown up in Seattle, where he had only the vaguest notions of what Kansas entailed: flat terrain, *The Wizard of Oz*, farming? It took his high school guidance counselor, who had also attended KU, to bring the school to James’s attention. With his high ACT score (31) and his 4.0 GPA, he had some options. The most prestigious art schools were at the top of his list: Rhode Island School of Design, Savannah College of Art & Design, etc. But he applied to KU as well and received a generous scholarship offer from the design department. And after visiting the campus and finding the community

in Lawrence fun and relaxed—not cliquish or cutthroat—he told the guidance counselor and his parents that it sounded like a good idea, and they agreed.

Professor Robinson turned the key in the lock and twisted the handle to no avail.

“One . . . two . . . *ooo*,” he said, as he leaned into the door, using his shoulder as a battering ram.

It finally popped open.

“They still haven’t fixed this,” he said.

Professor Robinson flipped on the lights and dropped his messenger bag by the foot of the metal desk all the faculty seemed to have in Teppinger Hall. His office was messy with bookshelves full of books and stacks of loose papers, the walls similarly covered with art, newspaper clippings, and various photos, as if Professor Robinson was afraid to leave any spot bare. An umbrella in the corner. Some old newspapers by the trash can. A couple of empty Diet Coke cans. A fan by the wall that James had never seen turned on. It was the type of office his mom would hate—disorganized and cluttered—but James loved it. It was a sanctuary of creativity and good conversation. He always had a good time here.

Professor Robinson tossed his keys on the messy desk, hitting the various papers and folders with a *thwop*. He sat down in the rolling chair with several pieces of duct tape on the seat, and leaned back. James took the nearby chair.

Professor Robinson yawned.

“Coffee?” he said, standing up suddenly.

“Sure, thanks,” James said.

Professor Robinson bent over the dirty Mr. Coffee in the corner, loaded it with grounds he scooped from a jar, and clicked the lone button. The whole thing whirred to life, rattling slightly.

He sat back down in the chair, staring into space, before turning to James. They locked eyes, Professor Robinson’s expression suddenly serious. “You’re not gonna ask what I was doing before class? With the cops?”

“Oh.” James shifted in his chair. “You saw me?”

“You stood there for like five minutes and watched. I was surprised you didn’t video it with your phone.”

“Oh jeez, I’m really sorry, I didn’t—”

“Anyway, it was nothing. Just a, just a misunderstanding. That’s all. Everyone’s so paranoid these days, y’know?” He gazed over James’s shoulder, slowly shaking his head, his eyes glassy. “But yeah, nothing.”

James just sat there, unsure what Professor Robinson meant exactly. Everyone’s so paranoid these days . . . about what?

“But maybe don’t say anything to anyone?” Professor Robinson said. “You know how people start imagining stuff.”

“Oh, I won’t,” James said, still nervous, though Professor Robinson didn’t seem mad at him . . . did he? But what the hell had the cops been talking to him about?

“Good,” Professor Robinson. He rapped his knuckles on his desk. “I knew I could trust you. Okay, so let’s get back to the focus. Ha, sorry to get all heavy there for a second, but I had to address it.” He clasped his hands and pointed his two index fingers, aligned like the

barrel of a gun, at James. A grin came over his face. “I have something I’m pumped to tell you about. Been waiting a few days actually.”

The sound of the coffeemaker hummed behind them. Someone in the hall passed by the office.

“Okay,” Professor Robinson said. He leaned back, tenting his fingers. “I got out of Kansas for a few days over break—thank God—and went to Palo Alto to visit my best friend, really great guy, Scott McDonald. He’s a creative director at Zatlan.”

“Oh yeah? I have one of their activity trackers.”

“No shit?” Professor Robinson leaned forward.

James angled his right arm toward Professor Robinson, revealing the gray band around his wrist, the Zatlan Instigator®. It tracked his steps, calories burned, pulse, body temperature, and more. Using his phone, which synced with the band, he could track numerous other things too, such as food and alcohol consumption. Occasional messages appeared on the tracker, offering tips like “Why not drink a glass of water right now?” “Slow down while you’re eating.” That was the type of stuff Zatlan made—wearable tech: activity and fitness trackers, smart watches, Bluetooth headsets, headphones, etc. In the last few years, James had started seeing their products everywhere. Headphones being worn at a coffee shop. Someone else using one of their necklace cameras that let you snap photos from a necklace and upload them to the Internet instantly. It seemed like every month they put out something new.

“I love it,” James said. “I got it for Christmas.”

“Dude, this is perfect. Yes! This is so perfect.” Professor Robinson was beaming, the practical opposite of his serious demeanor two minutes ago.

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, they’re obviously growing, and as part of that, Scott’s division is hiring a new graphic designer in the next few months. They haven’t posted the job listing yet, and I don’t know all the details, but it’ll primarily be web and mobile graphics. So obviously this job will be swamped with applicants, and not just new grads. People with years of experience, amazing portfolios, experience in digital, video, print, apps, etc. People all over the country and world. They were in *Forbes* last month. Huge article on them about how many of the Google and Apple execs are even using their stuff. I mean, heck, I saw something on ESPN not too long about how many colleges are giving their athletes some of their stuff to improve their workouts. It’s pretty crazy.”

“Man, have you told Leslie? That sounds like something she’d be perfect for.”

“Um, not yet.”

Professor Robinson stood up and stepped over to the Mr. Coffee. The freshly-brewed coffee was still dripping slowly into the pot, but he grabbed it anyway and poured two cups. He handed one to James and then returned to his seat with the other. He blew on his cup and then set it down.

“Are you really not getting what I’m getting at?”

“No, I—”

“Wow, man. Okay. *You* should get this job. You’d be great at it. I told Scott all about you, and he reacted very enthusiastically. Trust me, I don’t just talk about any KU students—I didn’t talk about any others when I talked to Scott. No, not Leslie. You know what they’ll be

up to after they graduate. Most of them will do, y’know, *fine*. They will hopefully land decent jobs, but this one, I think, is a really, really good job. I mean, I basically want it.” He sipped at his coffee, wincing at its perhaps bitter taste. “Companies like this want fresh blood, innovative minds. That’s you, man. And you got the design chops too. Damn, you really do. Leslie’s good, but she’s not you.”

“Wow,” James said. “I really appreciate that.” James was aware he was talented, but Zatlan, that seemed like a whole other level. An amazing, high level. A level he definitely wanted to reach, but something that felt several years away. And there was something else stopping him too. “The thing is, I’m going to Washington D.C.”

Professor Robinson jerked, as if startled by a loud crash. “D.C.? I mean, cool place and all, but—you have a job lined up already? Man, you gotta tell me these things.” He dropped his head back in defeat.

“No, no.” James lurched forward, feeling bad to be potentially letting down anyone, especially his professor, his greatest supporter in his graphic design career. “My girlfriend’s going there. She works in politics. She doesn’t have anything lined up yet—well, and neither do I—but she’s likely getting an internship for a representative. And obviously D.C.’s the place to be for someone in politics.” James shrugged but tentatively, his embarrassment—almost, shame—blossoming with each word.

“So, is this settled—you going to D.C. too? You want to go to D.C?”

James was suddenly having trouble maintaining eye contact. “We’ve talked about it a lot. We didn’t sign a formal contract or anything, ha, but that’s our plan.”

“Hmm.” Professor Robinson gave a tight-lipped nod.

The office fell silent.

Professor Robinson sipped his coffee. *Sluuuuurp*.

On the wall a clock ticked.

Someone else walked by in the hall.

“But, I mean,” James said, a gear turning in his mind, “maybe I should consider this position at Zatlan. It would be a dream—wow, I just hadn’t considered something like that. Happening now, I mean. Yeah, that would be amazing.”

Professor Robinson looked at James as if he had just said the earth is round. “Yes, you should definitely consider this. This is the opportunity of a lifetime. Not that you’d be hopeless and pathetic and unsuccessful in D.C., but I mean come on, this will put you in the major leagues. The *majors*. Right after you graduate. D.C., I mean, it’s a company town. All politics. Lobbyists, lawyers, etc. There’s a reason we only vote every few years. It’s just . . . ugh.” Professor Robinson held up his hands as if pumping the brakes. “But I understand you gotta consider this relationship. Is it pretty serious? This is the girlfriend I’ve met a few times?”

“Valerie, yeah. We’ve been together over three years.”

“I see. I guess you just have to think about it. Remember, relationships come and go. So do jobs, but this is an amazing opportunity. A job like this would be rightfully earned. Whereas D.C., I hope you don’t mind me saying, sounds like you compromising, which relationships are about to some extent, but . . . well, think about it.”

“I guess I could run it by her.”

“Yep, yep.” Professor Robinson bobbed his head up and down. “This sounds good. Just run it by her. Just see what she thinks. They have politics in Palo Alto too. Lots of stuff out there for that. Or maybe you guys do a long-distance thing for a while. D.C. burnout happens to a lot of young, aspiring do-gooders.” He tented his fingers again, pointing them at James. “Seriously man, you’re the most talented designer I’ve had in years. This is what you’ve been building to. You have potential. Don’t waste it.” He stood up abruptly, grabbing his keys and coat. “You can do a lot better than me. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Wait, what—”

James rose to his feet. He hadn’t even taken a sip of his coffee yet.

Professor Robinson put his hands on James’s shoulders. “Let me know soon. When you’re ready to do this, I’m ready to help you in whatever way I can. D.C., I got nothing in the way of contacts, but this job, I could help you. My recommendation alone won’t get you the job, but I’ll do what I can.”

He gave James a light shake.

“Okay,” James said. “I’ll talk to Valerie.” A few minutes ago he had been filled with anxiety about Professor Robinson and the cops, but now he was filled with an excitement about this unexpected opportunity. “I think you’re right.”

“Mm-hmm.” He gave James a go-get-’em punch on the arm, and then moved to the door before stopping. “You can do better than anyone here—yes, including your professors. If you want to.” And then he disappeared down the hall, leaving James standing in the office, staring at the door, his body still buzzing with the thought of achieving his dreams—and doing so much sooner than he thought.

Read the rest here:

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