

How Do I Tell You This

written by

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1 INT. ART GALLERY - LATE AFTERNOON 1

Open on a blank space of wall. On the far right side of frame, a lonely, empty wall mount. A card down and to the side, noting the title of an absent piece, and the artist: TED WALLACE.

A VERTICAL BLACK BAR materializes to divide the frame. On the left:

2 EXT. ART GALLERY - LATE AFTERNOON - SIMULTANEOUS 2

We're outside. A young Desi woman, mid-twenties, walks into frame. Black hair curls down just past her shoulders. Her large-framed glasses highlight her nervousness. This is ELIZABETH.

We follow her as she turns the corner, a line of exposed brick structures. She's searching for a number, double-checking her phone for an address.

She approaches a door covered in flyers, indicating a gallery opening that night. A couple of large canvases lean against the wall next to the door.

ELIZABETH is about to open the door.

Meanwhile:

3 INT. ART GALLERY - LATE AFTERNOON - SIMULTANEOUS 3

The GALLERY CURATOR, a younger woman, walks past the empty space. She notes it with a brief halt in her pace and a tap of her pen on the clipboard.

GALLERY CURATOR  
(loudly, shortly)  
TED?

TED - a white man, mid-twenties, dressed smartly, his bright smile barely masking his anxious energy - approaches from out of frame.

TED  
Yeah?

GALLERY CURATOR  
Where's *Karachi*?

TED  
Geographically?

GALLERY CURATOR  
It's missing.

TED looks at the card on the wall.

TED  
I pulled it.

GALLERY CURATOR  
*What.*

TED  
I told you I was saving that one.  
We can hang *The Wave* can there.

He walks over to some canvasses leaning against the wall.

GALLERY CURATOR  
You actually finished it?

He flips through them, not finding what he's looking for.

TED  
It's here...I know...

A lightbulb. He remembers.

TED (CONT'D)  
I'll be back.

We follow him as he walks briskly to the gallery door and exits.

4 EXT. ART GALLERY - LATE AFTERNOON

4

The gallery door pushes open, startling ELIZABETH.

ELIZABETH  
OH.

TED  
Oop, sorry!

Their eyes meet. Recognition. Surprise. TED smiles, elated.

Quiet for a beat. She looks him up and down. He looks good. She's almost disappointed. The BLACK BAR dividing the frame dissolves away.

TED (CONT'D)  
Liz.

ELIZABETH  
 (awkwardly)  
 Hey, Ted!

TED  
 It's...great to see you! I didn't  
 think you were coming. It wasn't on  
 the way.

ELIZABETH  
 Surprise!

TED  
 Wow. Great.

They both beam. TED suddenly remembers what he came out for.  
 He looks to the side and finds the canvas.

TED (CONT'D)  
 Let me grab this...

He picks it up.

It depicts a man, floating, suspended in some medium, just  
 inches off the ground. Arms limply raised. His hair wavy,  
 looking almost windblown, raised unnaturally. His face angry  
 and terrified.

Her face turns dark, affected. She glances at TED.

TED (CONT'D)  
 So, uh...we've got some time before  
 the doors open. I can step away for  
 a bit...go somewhere.

ELIZABETH  
 You sure?

TED  
 Absolutely. Let me just...hang him.

Some dark humor. He faintly chuckles.

ELIZABETH  
 Okay.

5 EXT. ART GALLERY - LATE AFTERNOON

5

ELIZABETH is standing outside, on the phone as TED exits the  
 gallery behind her, satchel slung over one shoulder.

ELIZABETH

(into earbuds, in Italian)  
 No, you need to get someone else to  
 head up that training...I mean, I  
 like Nasim, but he's not good with  
 new students. He made a widow cry  
 over her computer because she  
 couldn't set up a PivotTable.

TED walks up beside her. She sees.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

(into earbuds, in Italian)  
 Hey, we'll talk through this later.  
 (in English)  
 I gotta go.

She hangs up.

TED

Everything okay?

ELIZABETH

Work. Another big wave of migrants.  
 It's hard not having me in country.

TED

You're valuable. And the work's  
 important. Wish I had that.

They start walking down the downtown street.

ELIZABETH

Bonnie not appreciative of your  
 talents?

TED

Oh she's great. Loyal as could be.  
 She helped put the whole gallery  
 showing together.

ELIZABETH

I sense a "but" coming.

TED

Hey, butts don't do that.

ELIZABETH glares. Her playful smirk undercuts her outrage.

TED (CONT'D)

Nah, she's just trying so hard to  
 push me out of the nest. "Guy like  
 you? Talent and taste like you?  
 What're you still doin' here?"

ELIZABETH

Valid question.

TED

Shouldn't expect sympathy from the professional nomad.

ELIZABETH

No! I get it! Really, who wouldn't wanna stay home, in the town they've never left, painting places and things they're never gonna see?

TED sighs. His speechlessness says it all.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

Seriously though. It'll do you some good to finally get out of here.

TED

I will...when the time's right. Anyway. I assume Europe has only made you an even bigger coffee snob.

ELIZABETH

"Snob" implies pedantry. I just have taste. But go on.

TED

God, his words comin' outta your mouth. Josh would've liked you. Anyway, there's an excellent cafe just down here that'd be the perfect setting for our first in-person pen pal soirée.

ELIZABETH

It's 5:30, Ted. Not exactly latte hour.

TED

C'mon, the night's still young!

ELIZABETH shoots him a playful glare.

TED (CONT'D)

And, y'know...if you're still driving home tonight...

ELIZABETH

I don't have problems staying awake. Plus.

(MORE)

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
New anxiety prescription. Caffeine  
screws with the meds.

TED  
Ah. That's a killjoy.

ELIZABETH laughs. TED thinks.

TED (CONT'D)  
Could you manage a little  
celebratory champagne instead?

ELIZABETH  
As long as I don't overdo it,  
sounds perfect.

6 EXT. RIVERFRONT - NIGHT

6

The pair walk upon a riverbank in a nearby park. City lights  
reflect on the water's still surface.

TED  
The lake's one of my favorite  
spots.

ELIZABETH  
Looks more "river" to me.

TED  
This "river" doesn't go anywhere.  
It's an oxbow. Dammed up at both  
ends.

ELIZABETH  
I love it. It's very...serene.

TED  
Yeah. Josh liked it too.

TED sits down on the grass. ELIZABETH follows his cue. She's  
holding an unopened bottle of champagne.

TED (CONT'D)  
We spent many a lazy summer on this  
riverbank.  
(pointing)  
I was actually baptized right down  
there...  
(pointing other direction)  
And most of my classmates preferred  
down the way, for uh...less  
wholesome things.

ELIZABETH  
Did Ted partake?

TED  
Nah. I preferred here. Less  
crowded.

ELIZABETH  
Aww. Your own personal make-out  
spot! Such an individualist.

TED laughs nervously, but shrinks at the suggestion.

TED  
No, not at all. It's not like that.

ELIZABETH  
Go ahead. Tell me. How many?

TED  
How many what?

ELIZABETH  
You know! How many before...

She motions at herself with her hands.

TED  
Oh, you wouldn't wanna know.

ELIZABETH  
No, tell me.

TED  
You really don't...Lost count years  
ago.

ELIZABETH  
Bullshit.

TED  
Where? Did I step in it? Let me  
clean it up

They laugh. It dies down.

TED pauses.

TED (CONT'D)  
No, just the one.

ELIZABETH absorbs thoughtfully.



ELIZABETH  
Wow. Don't I feel special.

Beat.

TED  
Thank you again, for coming  
tonight. It means a lot.

ELIZABETH  
Of course.

TED  
I've got something for you.

ELIZABETH perks up in surprise. TED reaches around to his satchel, opening the flap.

Two canvasses sit inside. He pauses, considering his options.

He picks one. Hands it to ELIZABETH.

On the canvas: a tableau of the beach in Karachi, Pakistan. The water is dotted with small fishing boats that could easily be packed with fisherman...or migrants.

ELIZABETH recognizes it instantly.

ELIZABETH  
Oh. Ted.

TED  
I hoped you'd like it.

ELIZABETH  
It's beautiful. My parents loved  
this beach. I never got to see it  
before we left.

TED  
I know.

ELIZABETH sighs. She's uncomfortable with the kindness of the gesture.

ELIZABETH  
You're so sweet, Ted. Thank you.

TED smiles. He motions for the champagne. ELIZABETH hands it to him. He starts working on opening it. ELIZABETH sits quietly.

TED  
You okay, Liz?

ELIZABETH

I'm just...I've been nervous about meeting you tonight, and I was really hoping I wouldn't be.

TED turns this over in his head as he continues fiddling with the cork.

TED

And why's that.

ELIZABETH

Because I actually do have feelings for you.

The cork pops. The champagne fizzes and sprays from the mouth.

TED looks at ELIZABETH in surprise. A bit slackjawed. He searches her face.

TED

Wait, *what??*

ELIZABETH is surprised at his reaction.

TED (CONT'D)

You do have feelings for me?

ELIZABETH

That's what I said.

She takes the bottle from TED. He's about to say something when:

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

That's the reason that you make me nervous. But I also feel silly telling you that because I know we could never work.

She takes a swig from the bottle. TED's face falls. His brow furrows in confusion.

TED

I don't understand.

ELIZABETH

I mean, for one, you don't feel the same way. You've moved on. Dated other people.

TED

I didn't just move on.

ELIZABETH  
That's not funny.

ELIZABETH laughs as she looks at Ted, squinting, searching for the joke in his face. She doesn't find it. A realization.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
Oh, Ted.

She stands up.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
Oh God, that's not how this was supposed to go.

TED stands up.

TED  
How was this supposed to go?

She starts walking, almost pacing to think. TED follows.

ELIZABETH  
You weren't supposed to like me!  
The only reason I even said anything was that I was sure you didn't! That was supposed to make it easier.

TED  
Hold up, you were the one that didn't want to date, what was it, three years ago?

ELIZABETH  
God, *three years??*

TED  
Meg says "oh I have this great friend, you should add her on Facebook." Two months of chatting later and "Oh sorry, I just don't see you that way." You said-

ELIZABETH  
I know! I know what I said.

TED  
So, what? Did you just lie about it back then?

ELIZABETH  
No! Well...I don't know. I wasn't sure until now!

(MORE)

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

I just didn't see a scenario where it would work out. The distance. I was about to go abroad. And you...you seemed to be trying to go your own direction.

TED

Doesn't make it not worth *trying*?

ELIZABETH throws her hands up. She takes another drink from the bottle, then offers it to TED. He takes a sip.

TED (CONT'D)

So what changed?

Beat.

ELIZABETH

I don't know. Meeting in person...changes things. Kind of the last straw. Why'd you have to be so damn romantic?

TED

I wasn't trying to be.

ELIZABETH

Of course you weren't. It just comes *naturally*. If Mom were here she'd be *dying*. You know how many of my her friends' sons just *happened* to stop by the house since I've been back?

TED

God, more than one?

ELIZABETH

*In the same night!* She's been trying so hard to lock me down.

TED

She just wants you home. To your family, it might not be one without you.

ELIZABETH

I don't even know what home is anymore. New Orleans was never the same after Katrina. Can't go back to the Motherland. And Arkansas?? What a joke.

TED listens intently. He's heard this before, but it's different hearing it in person.

TED

Sometimes people can be enough to feel like home. I know you can't always rely on family, but even just a person...

ELIZABETH

Like your brother?

TED stops walking. ELIZABETH turns.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

That was Josh, wasn't it? The one you just finished?

TED nods. ELIZABETH walks up to him.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

That's a helluva a way to capture someone drowning.

TED

My dad won't look at it. Thought it was ghoulish.

ELIZABETH

Jesus, for once, I find a guy who knows how to process and handle his own shit.

TED

(counting on his hand)  
Emotionally stable. Creative.  
Smart. Occasionally funny.

ELIZABETH

You can stop. I already tried to find reasons not to like you. I failed...clearly.

TED

Okay, so why still 'no'? Why 'Yes' but still 'No'?

ELIZABETH

Just think about it, Ted! In a month, I'm leaving again.

TED

But you're just finishing out a contract.

ELIZABETH  
After, they're gonna pay for me to  
finish school.

TED  
Fantastic! And after?

Silence.

ELIZABETH  
I wanna stay.

TED absorbs.

TED  
You think I'd hold you back.

ELIZABETH  
That's not fair.

TED  
Liz, I could do what I do anywhere.

ELIZABETH  
Then why aren't you?

TED  
(wounded)  
You know why.

He sips from the bottle again.

TED (CONT'D)  
We've already been long-distance  
friends for this long. What's a  
step further?

ELIZABETH  
And how long would that last?  
You're gonna come join me in Italy?

TED  
(short chuckle)  
Sounds great! For you, why not?

ELIZABETH  
(painful scoff)  
"For me."

TED  
Yes, you! It's crazy, you know.  
Every girl I've been with since you  
and I have known each other, in my  
head, I've quietly compared to you?  
(MORE)

TED (CONT'D)  
 Like "I like this girl, BUT" -  
*always* the 'but' - "I wish she felt  
 like..."

ELIZABETH shoots him a pleading look, not to finish the sentence. He relents.

Beat.

TED (CONT'D)  
 So that's it? We're just gonna go  
 back to being each other's internet  
 crushes?

ELIZABETH  
 It sucks. I know. If I'd known how  
 you felt...

Beat.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
 Maybe there'll be another chance,  
 further down the river...

TED looks at the still, dead water. The cork from the champagne floats tauntingly in place.

TED  
 You know, I can't count how many  
 times I wanted to tell you how I  
 felt. It always felt selfish,  
 somehow.

ELIZABETH grimaces.

TED's gathering himself. Trying to pull some aspect of his guard back up. He smiles.

TED (CONT'D)  
 Well, thanks. For...putting it out  
 there.

ELIZABETH  
 You're mad.

TED  
 No, I'm not mad. What kind of  
 friend would I be if I were mad?

He doesn't know it's a lie until he says it. He frowns, then finds a comforting smile.

ELIZABETH flashes a melancholy smile

7

EXT. DOWNTOWN - NIGHT

7

TED and ELIZABETH walk back towards the gallery together in silence. They stop in a small alleyway.

TED

So you're...

ELIZABETH

(pointing)

Yeah, I'm this way.

TED

I'll walk you, if you want.

ELIZABETH

No, that's fine. You need to get back.

(beat)

Thank you. For one lovely night.

TED nods.

Silence. A beat.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

Are we...good, Ted? You okay?

TED looks as though shaken out of a numb stupor.

TED

Yeah, I'm good. We're...

The statement trails off.

A VERTICAL BLACK BAR materializes on the screen between ELIZABETH and TED, separating them in the frame.

TED (CONT'D)

Well, it was great...meeting you doesn't feel right...we've known each other so long.

ELIZABETH

I know.

They hug in a full embrace. TED's eyes are distant. ELIZABETH inhales a breath from his jacket, her eyes closing.

TED kisses her softly on top of her head, among the tangle of hair. She winces.

They separate.



8 EXT. DOWNTOWN - NIGHT 8

ELIZABETH walks toward her car. The car is parked in front of the entrance to a bar. Loud jazz music spills out into the night. She's about to open her door to climb in, but stops. She looks toward the bar.

9 INT. BAR - NIGHT 9

ELIZABETH walks down the alleyway to a private courtyard. The jazz music plays over a set of speakers.

ELIZABETH absorbs the atmosphere for a moment. A look of comfort. She walks through the courtyard up to the bar. She approaches the bartender.

ELIZABETH  
(to the bartender)  
Tequila.

She waits, processing. The bartender brings her a shot. She's about to knock it back.

She thinks. She sets the full shot back down on the bar. Pushes it away.

ELIZABETH searches the room again.

10 INT. BAR BATHROOM 10

ELIZABETH locks the bathroom door. She walks up to the sink, looking into the mirror.

She removes her glasses and carefully wipes the edges of her eyes. She starts shaking just slightly.

She fishes her hand into her bag. She pulls out a prescription bottle.

She pours out a couple pills, popping them into her mouth. She cups water to her lips to help them down. The faucet runs.

Closing her eyes, she breathes in, deep.

11 EXT. DOWNTOWN - NIGHT 11

Meanwhile, we follow TED.

TED watches ELIZABETH as she goes, then starts walking towards the gallery. His expression is blank, distant.

He arrives back at the gallery. He pushes the door open, then pauses. Light and crowd noise pour out. He thinks.

He lets the door close, and continues walking.

As he walks his expression turns downward. Frustration, dejection, anger, all whirl together behind his eyes. His lips curl.

He shakes his head, trying to bottle it back up. It's not working.

12

EXT. RIVERFRONT DOCK

12

He finds himself again at the water's edge, further down the riverfront. He looks out over the water.

TED walks out to the end of the dock. He sets his satchel down as he goes, takes a deep, calming breath. He stares at the water's surface for a moment.

The CORK from the champagne bottle floats by. He watches it go, surprised. Something clicks.

TED jumps. SPLASH!

The water ripples. A few moments of quiet.

TED reemerges from the water, lifting himself up onto the dock's edge. He turns, sitting with his legs hanging over the side.

He massages the CORK between his fingers, giving it a toss into the air. Determination washes over. He stands.

The splitscreen returns. TED and ELIZABETH look toward each other's side of the frame. TED backs away as ELIZABETH bows her head.

THE END