

Prologue



Through the Looking Glass

Have you ever seen the life within a photograph? Ever pondered how it might feel to be one of those images – trapped, immobile for all time? One minute you're moving along, free as a bird. Then, in the glaring flash of a bulb, you are transfixed; an image captured on a glossy white expanse. Eternity in one tiny breath of life. Not quite a reflection. A pawn without a soul. A plaything in the eternal memory of technology. Photographers live through the lens of a camera, pressing onward frame by frame. But real life isn't like that. It rushes at you headlong with a thundering force that knocks you breathless and leaves you there to bleed. Beautiful in its savagery, intoxicating in its fierce desire for more.

Black and white is supposedly clearer, but I have to ask, what's the use in clarity with all the colors gone? The colors give us purpose; make things more than shades of gray. And if one person's orange is another one's violet, then so be it. All's fair among the varied hues of earthly existence.

Or so I tell myself when colors become pain, when I stand in the developing room of life, watching the images un-fade before me through the ripples of my past. I often feel as though I can relate to

Alice in her Wonderland, like I've fallen through a rabbit hole into my life and it's not at all what I expected it to be. I recall gazing for hours at the illustrations in my father's antique books. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* held my fascination for hours on end. Perfect little Alice. Through all her misadventures, not a hair out of place. I wanted to be like her. I wanted to *be* her.

Time and again my memory assaults me and I'm thrust into the child I once was. I am in my father's study, wondering at bookshelved walls lined with stately, aged tomes. My father kneels beside me. In his hands he holds his newest possession, his eyes glazed over like a child at Christmas, which, coincidentally, it is. In his study, books are opened like presents, holding wondrous things inside. He opens the volume in his hand, a rare 1847 first edition of *Wuthering Heights*, and tells me to smell the book. I do so, timidly at first, then taking a good whiff. There is a scent like dusty cedar in the attic, the aroma of thoughts transcribed so long ago. I inhale the pungency of words, and a tradition is born.

The auras of butter-rum punch and cinnamon are also calming presences. In the corner of the living room there stands a Christmas tree. The slowly blinking lights invade my consciousness and I fall asleep on his lap, curled up in his substantial arms, head resting on his shoulder. I long to stay within that memory, and so many of its fellows. The feeling of a shadow left behind. The overwhelming yearning of an all-too-bittersweet life.

Still, the days of youth fall like petals from a flower. All too soon they fade and blow away. We reach the gates of Grown-up Land in haste, only to hesitate outside them for a time in shell-shocked horror, wondering how we got there so damn fast.

And so we advance through life, pressing on but looking back, becoming collectors of things. Memories of sunsets, pictures of our days and friends and loves. Wondrous little snippets of each moment long gone by. These are things we hoard throughout our lifetime; things we cannot bear to part with, all the trinkets of our past. They

exist to prove that we were here. So that one day when we are gone, in some future just beyond our grasp, someone may stop by, happen upon our worldly goods and say, “Ah, so this was a life, then. Look! Here is proof. I’ve found a silver acorn, a Royal typewriter and a diary of thoughts. Here’s a poem, there’s a thimble, an old book collecting dust. Whatever could it mean? Alas, I suppose we’ll never know.”

Each soul is a mystery, a puzzle box of hopes and wants and dreams, and all the pretty little pieces of the vast illusion we create to shield our inner selves. In the end, the colors run and bleed together, and finally fade into the dust. But the evidence remains; captured images and writing and the like.

And so, who is more real, more permanent? The one who gazes into the mirror, or the reflection locked inside?

Chapter 1



Metaphor

I miss you.

Don't go back yet.

Stay. Stay with me.

I can't. You have to go.

Go now.

Insistent rays of Sunday piercing through the numbing haze of sleep. I remember morning and the timid play of light upon the water. The sky in tones of peach and coral fire. For a moment it is peaceful, like a gently blowing breeze. Then the sun consumes the sky, consumes the earth in brilliant flames, and it is day. Too bright. Too futile. The light can hurt your eyes, like a memory. Better not to look at it. Better just to dream.

No, not today. Something might follow you back.

I pulled myself out of bed, letting the dreams fall away, shedding my sleep-skin like a well-worn blanket and stepping into the day. My clock was blinking; an obvious allusion to a passing storm during the night. Judging by the play of light and shadows on my wall, afternoon was fast approaching. Yawning, I rubbed my aching eyes. I'd been up

half the night again, waging an unholy battle of words. It had cost me dearly, this bold and naked journey into my other world, and I couldn't even remember what I'd written. I would read it later, sometime tonight, and decide if all the effort had been worth it, if I had truly emerged victorious from the settling dust of truth and make-believe.

The water was cold as I splashed my face, leaving me breathless. I looked into the mirror at the person staring back at me, watching the liquid tendrils wind their way down my forehead and my cheeks, traveling down my neck to touch the silver chain I had sworn I'd never take off. It was long and fine, but merely the instrument of the treasure that it carried. I touched the white gold ring that was its captive, tracing the edge with one forefinger, watching my reflection all the while. Who was this child-like woman? What was she thinking? Would I ever really know?

I studied her, as I would a stranger, memorizing her colors, seeking contrasts in her eyes, her smile, her pose. She was Myself, yet not always me. My twin. My imp. My paradox. She wore her beauty like a battle scar; aware of its existence but refusing to take note of it.

Disheveled blonde hair nearly reaching her shoulders, pale skin, a spattering of passing freckles, pert little nose with a mind of its own, always thinking it was better than the rest of the features. What her grandmother would have called a beauty mark resided on the left side of her smallish chin, which mark, upon further inspection, would be revealed as nothing more than a mole in haughty disguise. The eyes – the soul's own windows. I considered them to be her best feature, never mind what the nose would have to say about it. Slightly almond shaped and a deep shade of green, they appeared out of her pale skin in a startling way. Her eyebrows arched above them, darker than they should have been; little smudges of contrast on an otherwise stark canvas, with a dusky fringe of eyelashes to match.

A host of memories played behind her eyes. The black and white, the colors, all the happiness and loss, every lovely shade of in be-

tween. I ached for the resilience that she hid behind her back, taunting me with the knowledge of my need. Neither mindful nor oblivious; an indifferent, wanton child desensitized by time. Stronger for the tragedy, she held greedily to the thorns of past regrets. She was my only link to rationality, though madness could possess her at its whim. She was fragile. She was tested. She was brave. The representation of all that I could ever hope to be, if only I knew how. Through my own eyes she gazed back, as ever, refusing to let me in.

I've wondered sometimes how long I can lock myself out, yet she still denies me the pleasure of a formal introduction. She frightens me and calls to me, my watercolor darling in the glass. I could grow to love her if I dared.

"Who are you, really?" I said aloud. My reflection shrugged and turned away.

I walked slowly to the kitchen, running my palm along the wall, not wanting to lose contact with something solid, something real. A patiently withering houseplant reposed upon my counter, awaiting her demise with steadfast grace.

"O rose of May! Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!" I lamented, sticking my finger in the soil. It was still moist, which caused me to consider the possibility that I was drowning her. I made a mental note to consult Mrs. Babcock about it. After all, she was the one who had insisted on giving me the silly plant in the first place, "So you won't be lonely, dear." As if a houseplant would be such good company.

My stomach lodged a complaint and, grabbing a banana, I hoisted myself up onto my kitchen counter. I surveyed the landscape from the window as I chewed, blinking out into the day. My second storey apartment was bathed in the shade of several oak trees, and I noticed the resident squirrels were at it again. I watched them chase each other, fussing about the most mundane of topics. I had a fantastic observation point for their antics from both my kitchen and bedroom windows. Unfortunately, that meant they had the same unobstructed

view of my life. I'm sure this wouldn't bother most people, but to say it unnerved me wouldn't be overstating the situation. On the bright side, at least it gave me a steady excuse for feeling paranoid.

I shuffled to the door in my moose slippers, Bullwinkle staring straight ahead from each foot, antlers protruding and slapping one another as I walked. They were last year's Christmas gift from Carly, repayment for the donkey ones I had given her the year before. John didn't think I would actually wear them, but his insightful daughter knew better. "Oh yes she will!" she chirped. And she was right. I almost hadn't wanted to, just to prove her wrong, but they were too damn comfortable to resist. In the end, I caved, and had been wearing them on a daily basis ever since.

I made my way outside, pausing to scoop up Matt's copy of *The St. Augustine Sun* which he had been careless enough to leave untouched upon his doorstep. I took it with me to the stairs, stepping down a couple and planting my pajama-clad bottom securely on the landing. The aroma of newspaper enveloped me as I perused the local happenings. "Bridge of Lions Rehabilitation Project: What You Need to Know," I read aloud, "by Jefferson Todd, Staff Writer." I smiled to myself. *Haven't gotten your big break yet, huh, Jeff? Good.*

I skimmed the article with a negative eye, ensuring I was unimpressed, then scanned the rest of the paper. Nothing earth-shattering caught my attention and I eventually re-folded it as neatly as possible and slid it back toward Apartment Four. Even if Matt noticed a few new creases, I knew he wouldn't mind. And if he did, he'd never mention it.

Following the sound of a door closing downstairs, I watched Mrs. Babcock make her way to the coiled garden hose behind the stairs. Dressed in light blue Capri pants and a loose fitting white blouse tied in a knot at her waist, her fading auburn hair pinned up under her sunhat, she looked like Miss August from the AARP calendar. Her feet were bare and her toenails were painted a light, pretty pink.

I hope I'm like that when I'm old, I thought, as if the years would

somehow transform me into an entirely different person just because I'd asked. She glanced up at me, and I waved.

"Good morning, Devon!" she called.

"Is it still morning?" I asked.

"Just barely," she said with a smile, confirming her acceptance of my unusual sleeping patterns. "How's Ophelia doing?"

I grimaced. "Actually, I was going to ask your advice. She seems a little depressed lately."

Unfazed by this development, she replied, "Oh, just put a couple of used tea bags around her roots and pour a little water over them. Should perk her up in no time." She began to water her begonias. "That was some storm we had last night. But I'm sure you slept right through it. You young people always do." She threw a wink at me.

The sound of a car engine and squealing brakes accompanied Cass's familiar black Camry as it rounded the corner. She parked it on the lawn, ignoring the two empty guest spaces. Cass emerged. She pushed her designer sunglasses over her forehead, wearing them like a headband atop her mass of frizzy curls. She was poured into her stretch jeans and a clingy, low-cut t-shirt, revealing plenty of caramel skin below her neck. Slamming her door, she proceeded to the trunk. She was bent double and leaning as far in as she could when some passing teenagers cat-called from the street. Ignoring them, she hoisted a giant box, balancing it on one bent knee while she tried to get a better grip.

"Do you need some help with that, Cassandra?" Mrs. Babcock called in her soft, reminiscently Southern drawl.

"No," puffed Cass, "I think I can handle it, Mrs. Babcock. But thank you for offering." She looked pointedly up at me as I remained perched atop the stairs, like one of her painted gargoyles, obstinately immobile.

"It's not that I don't want to help you, Cass," I said, "but I've learned that sometimes it's best to stay out of your way."

As if to prove my point, she stuck out her tongue and lost her

balance, wobbling in her platform sandals and hitting her head on the trunk.

“Ow! Damn!” she yelled, and a squirrel fussed at her from his vantage point high in the oak tree.

“My dear, whatever do you have in that box?” asked Mrs. Babcock as Cass struggled past, holding the cardboard leviathan in front of her, both arms supporting its awkward weight.

“Cass is starting her own make-up company,” I answered for Cass, giving her a chance to catch her breath.

“It’s kind of a grass roots movement right now,” she chimed.

“And we’re the roots,” I said. “She’s lugging those toxic substances up here so we can put the labels on them.”

Mrs. Babcock frowned to herself. “Oh, my,” she said, looking up at me from beneath the brim of her sunhat. “But wouldn’t it have been easier for you to go to Cassandra’s house? Then she wouldn’t have had to bring it all over here.” Cass and I looked at one another, bursting into laughter. We hadn’t thought of that. “And what about that nice boyfriend of yours, Cassandra? Couldn’t he help you?”

Cass rolled her eyes at me. “Actually, I’m between boyfriends right now,” she said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” said Mrs. Babcock, as if we’d told her Cass had three more days to live. “What happened to the last one?”

“That’s what’s really in the box,” I said, eliciting another chuckle from Cass.

“And how’s *your* love life, Mrs. Babcock?” she asked, sly as a fox.

The older woman blushed to the whitish roots of her hair. “Actually, Mr. Rooney, a nice gentleman from my Bingo club, recently asked me to dinner. But I turned him down.”

“Why would you do that?” asked Cass in consternation.

Mrs. Babcock waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, I had my chance at love. And many wonderful years with Mr. Babcock, rest his soul. I’d rather leave all the romance up to you young folk.”

For Mrs. Babcock, this course of inaction was harmless and com-

pletely logical. To Cass it was an outrage. “Nonsense! You’re never too old for romance! Mrs. Babcock,” she said determinedly, carefully placing the box on the ground and taking her by the shoulders, “I want you to march inside and call Mr. Rooney right now. Tell him you’re accepting his dinner invitation and you’re very much looking forward to getting to know him better.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly...”

Cass turned her to face her door, barely missing the geraniums. “Oh, yes you could possibly!”

Mrs. Babcock sighed, stepping away from Cass, shooing her in mock anger. “Oh, all right. But not right now. He’s out of town visiting his son. I’ll call when he gets back.”

Cass looked at her, judging her resolve. For the grandmotherly type, Mrs. Babcock sure could hold a steely gaze. Satisfied, Cass rehoisted the box and headed up the stairs. “I’ll check in with you next week,” she called over her shoulder.

“I’ll just bet you will, you little busy body!” Mrs. Babcock pretended to turn the hose on Cass and was rewarded with a squeal. I forced myself upright with a sigh, removing my slippers and tossing them back into my apartment. I met Cass halfway up the stairs. Panting, she handed me the box and followed me into my lair.

“Don’t trip on my mooses,” I said as we entered.

“How clumsy do you think I am?” she replied indignantly. I felt no need to respond.

Easing the box onto the nearest flat surface, which happened to be my coffee table, I asked her, “So, how’s the cosmetics business?”

“A couple of nibbles from the on-line auctions this week. Mostly overseas. What can I say? Our economy sucks! I so wish I could quit my stupid day job, but I still have to pay the bills.” She absentmindedly thumbed through a relatively fresh edition of the entertainment magazine I subscribed to, mainly for the book reviews. I recalled tossing it onto the sofa some time last week, none the wiser as to the current status of any and all Hollywood relationships, but

intimately familiar with the most recent novels to crack the top ten on their Bestsellers List. Cass went on, "I'm thinking of putting up a few more paintings, or maybe even trying that gallery again. Last time I checked, the same stuck-up bitch was still running it, though. Guess she's not big on dark surrealism."

I began removing little jars from the box, placing them carefully on the table. "I feel for you, sister. Art snobs aren't much different from the literary variety. They're all waiting for you to lay your soul out in front of them so they can turn up their noses and walk all over it."

"Finished with your novel yet?"

I groaned in reply. "And the online mag I was writing for went under last week."

"I'll bet it doesn't help to see Todd the Toad's articles every time you sneak a glance at Matt's paper, either, huh?" She looked at me knowingly and I bristled.

"I wish him nothing but the best, I really do."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"No, really. If it wasn't for him stabbing me in the back, I might have his job right now. Who wants the stressful life of a reporter?"

"You do."

I sighed. "I did, I admit it. But I honestly don't anymore. I want to write from the heart and fill the pages of a book with my imagination and experience, not waste it on the reality of newsworthy events that anyone could research and describe."

"Reporters are fact monkeys, I get it. And you're holding out for something more. But in the meantime..."

"I may have to hit up me dear ol' Da for the rent again."

Cass tossed the magazine back on the sofa and studied me. "Why don't you just move back in with him, Dev? He's got that whole big house for you to prowl around in, and your lake besides."

I was already shaking my head. "No way. It would be like admitting defeat, and I'm not ready to do that yet. Taking his money is one

thing, but actually living with him is quite another. I've been getting by just fine for the past ten years or so. I'll manage."

She smiled devilishly. "Well, if it comes down to it, we can always move in together."

I flinched, remembering the fight caused by a misunderstanding that had nearly destroyed our friendship many years before. "Again, no way. I think we learned that lesson the hard way. Besides, I have a feeling Botero wouldn't take too kindly to a new addition to the household."

She rolled her eyes. "That giant walking hairball needs an attitude adjustment. And, anyway, he was de-clawed before I ever got him, rendering him virtually harmless, albeit enormous, poor thing," she said. "That creature, on the other hand..." She let her statement trail off, looking askance at my ever-present taxidermied hyena. He unassumingly reposed in the corner of my living room, causing all who entered to do a double take. Mrs. Babcock had only ventured in once, and after seeing Smiley, had since made excuses not to come inside.

I flopped down on the sofa, grabbing a throw pillow to hug. "Hey, he's the perfect pet! Completely housebroken, doesn't need walking, requires no food or water, and is exceptionally good company, especially for a cloistered writer. You have to put up with a bad-tempered twenty pound cat as a roomie. But," I conceded, "at least you've got a real job, even if you hate it. And benefits. And a car."

Cass threw herself down next to me, stealing my pillow in the process. "Yeah, but you don't have a car because you don't see the need for one, or a real job, for that matter. And like you said, you've gotten by just fine, without ever workin' for the man like I'm stuck doing. Believe me, Dev, once you get in, you can never get out. The gray suits suck you in and there's no turning back." She paused, inserting a long-suffering sigh. "And speaking of the car, it's nothing but trouble."

I sat up straighter. "But you loved that car. What happened?"

She frowned, shaking her head so her tiny spiral curls bounced around her face. “I did love it. But it got so old so fast! At first it was exciting and new, but now it’s got so many miles on it, the warranty’s expired and everything’s falling apart. But I still have to fork over the cash every month.”

“Sounds like your last relationship.”

“Yeah. Kind of like that.” She giggled. “Maybe we should do away with my car...put it in a box and dispose of it, like you said we did with Sergio.”

I smiled, but the image had struck a distant chord in my mind. It’s the curse of a writer’s imagination. New ideas spring to life faster than you can sort them out and determine whether they belong with the keepers or in the discard pile. This was one of those moments, and I said, without giving it much thought, “I guess you could always drive it into some random body of water and claim that it was stolen. That would solve your problem, right?”

Cass quickly produced a smile, letting it fade more slowly than it had arrived. When she looked up at me, I felt a tickle of apprehension scurry up my spine. “That’s not a bad idea, Dev!”

“Oh, yes it is,” I said vehemently. “I say stupid things all the time and they are not meant to be taken seriously. Just ask my editor. Shoot! I don’t have one right now. Guess you’ll have to take my word for it.” I picked up a jar containing some sort of powder that I would never know what to do with and held it up for closer inspection. “Hey, what’s this shade called, anyway?”

She removed it from my hand, placing it back on the table. “Don’t distract me, Dev. I’m thinking.” She chewed on her thumbnail while the talented fingers of her free hand drummed an impossible rhythm on the pillow. Finally, she shook her head, like someone emerging from hypnosis. “We’ll work it out later. But I think, whenever we discuss it, we should call it ‘water polo’ so no one will know what we’re talking about.” As if anyone ever did.

At this point, I knew there was nothing for it but to go along with

her, at least for the time being. Besides, I thought, *if there's one thing I know about Cass it's that she never follows through with anything*. I glanced at the make-up jars on my coffee table, wondering if any of them would ever see the light of day.

We spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening meticulously applying the labels to the jars, one by one, talking about nothing in particular. We took one short break to wolf down some sandwiches Mrs. Babcock was kind enough to deliver, along with a pitcher of her patented sweet tea, and got straight back to work.

When Cass finally stretched and got up to leave around eight-thirty, the last of the labels being successfully applied to the last of the jars, and every jar packed gently in the box again, I held my breath that the subject of water polo wouldn't rear its ugly head. To my vast relief, it did not. I hoped against hope that this lack of further discussion of the topic was enough to cause it to simply shrivel up and die. But in the back of my mind there lurked the distressing knowledge that sometimes the only things Cass followed through with were the very ones she should have taken the greatest pains to avoid.

Cass turned to me, one hand on the door knob, her foot resting against the box, ready to slide it out the door, and said, "Oh, by the way, my family is having a barbecue at my mom's house next Saturday for Janette's sixteenth birthday. You're invited, of course, so you have to come. All my sisters will be there. It'll be just like old times!"

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said, and helped her carry the box to her car.

Night drew the curtains on another day. Alone in the fresh darkness of a new night, I curled up with a dog-eared copy of *Crime and Punishment*, thinking how fitting a read it would be after my conversation with Cass. I reached up and turned on my lamp. The rest of the apartment was dark. I had already closed all the blinds. I told myself it was so the squirrels couldn't see in. But deep down I knew better.