

An excerpt from:

Caught In the Mirror

A novel by:

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Prologue

I cradled my cut forearm as if it was an infant. My twelve-year-old eyes met my forever pupils in the bathroom mirror. I had nicked it on purpose.

Perhaps, it is the rhythm of the rocking that brings back this memory, twenty plus years later, now that I use a similar sway to soothe my tiny daughter nearly every heartbeat of every day. But more is the same, too.

As a new mother, I am tumbling through the rounds of questioning so reminiscent of adolescence. Addressing the internet, friends, parents, our pediatrician, my husband, and especially my own self, I ask, what to do, when to do it and even, how should I be?

At least during this current decent into Wonderland, I already have, like pieces of cake stuffed in my pockets, two truths:

There is no definitive answer.

I *will*, eventually, surface.

I earned these convictions that year, the year that would end with me turning thirteen, the year that held tragedies, epiphanies, and a week of family vacation that would change my perspective forever.

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The spring before our annual trip, I shifted my weight from side-to-side and watched blood bead up across the small cut. The chaos of time collapsed into a single moment. The relief was so breathtaking, I laughed.

Oh, this is why they do it.

I wasn't the cutting type. I knew that. I was the straight A, shy, cautious type, who very occasionally showed miniature bits of brilliance on the page and stage. I had just been curious, that's all. A bit of research. Curiosity is a good thing, no?

It didn't hurt. And it wasn't very big. I had been careful to cut far away from the veins, pushing a shaving razor hard into the fleshy part of my forearm, to bypass the safety band and nick my flesh.

But when the pain did come, it brought a measure of pride. I had taken control. This one sensation had not been thrust upon me, unlike the other feelings that battered me all day long.

This one, I had chosen. I grinned at myself in the bathroom mirror, at the strangeness of my own behavior. Blood pooled softly at the cut.

The real me coming through.

The red trickled around the side of my arm. I blotted it with toilet paper and winced as I poured rubbing alcohol over the opening. I would need a band aid. And a long sleeve shirt.

And just like that, I was annoyed with myself again.

Was this how she had started?

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Ten minutes later, I bounded down the stairs, buoyed by my research. My mother looked up, surprised to see me. I had been spending a lot of time in my room, coming out only for meals and school. For the last three months or so. Since Sonya.

“Alice! Hi! Dinner’s a couple hours away still.” She smiled uneasily and shifted her position on the couch. She was nursing Toby.

“I know,” I said, suddenly unsure what I was doing downstairs.

“You okay? Would you like to talk?” Her anxiety was palpable. I considered retreating but Toby saved me. He began to fuss, and Mom switched him to the other side, flashing her bare breast in the process.

“I’m just going to check the mail.”

She nodded but was focused on helping Toby latch.

The mailbox held the usual mess of Value Pac coupons, account updates and catalogs for toys, shoes and clothes. The women in the L.L. Bean catalog stared with a certain focus. What had they been like as kids? In the Victoria’s Secret catalog, the women snarled seductively. I flipped through quickly, knowing Mom would recycle it immediately.

At the back of the box, there was an envelope with my name in loopy cursive. I recognized the handwriting immediately: Mirabelle.

Mirabelle was ten, a true child, with the self-confidence of someone twice her age. We had become pen pals four years ago, our parents cooing at the wholesomeness and the penmanship practice. I’ll admit, I liked it at first, the thrill of getting something in the mail from a far-off place, with a mysteriously marked-up stamp. But within a few years, as my knowledge of the internet grew, I found it quaint and impractical. Still, we exchanged the occasional

handwritten letter. Not often, a couple times a year, in between seeing each other every summer for our families' mutual vacation.

Inside Mirabelle's envelope, there was no folded piece of paper, nothing scrawled with updates about her annoying brother and fun weekends. There was just a school photo, wallet-size.

She had a particularly beautiful mouth, a near perfect little bow, and she had chosen the close-lipped smile that was so popular among my classmates. Instead, it was her eyes that grinned at the photographer, with both mirth and condescension. Her head was slightly cocked, and her light hair rested over one shoulder, like a coiled kitten, asleep or ready to pounce, it was impossible to tell.

I flipped the photo over to see her curly handwriting: "Can you guess my secret?" The question was followed by a perfect, casual, hand-drawn heart.

After a day of flipping the semi-glossed picture over and over, simultaneously churning responses in my mind, I realized that the only way I could regain stature as the older friend, was to pretend I wasn't interested in the answer. To pretend I was too busy to respond. Whatever she had to tell me, I decided, could wait until I saw her this summer.

But in the interim the question grew bigger in my mind. Her question morphed with my own questions, about all the secrets, all the knowledge that, I felt, was being kept from me. As a tween without a phone.

Day One

The glare of the airport's overhead lights held the promise of clarity. In contrast to the warm blur at home, and the rising dawn out the car windows, here the light was an unflinching glower, almost that of a laboratory. The metal weave on the push carts, the squint of eyes at signs, the lines in the linoleum, the hooks on the ropes that forced queues – everything was equally lit, with a brightness so clear, it silenced my other senses.

We had driven an hour and a half to get to JFK airport, waking at four am, my mother shaking me gently, coffee on her breath, promising me a chocolate croissant in the car. Peter had eaten half of his and fallen silent, looking out the window. Toby had screamed until Mom

climbed into the back and nursed him, bent over his car seat with her breast just barely reaching his mouth, while we careened down the highway.

I closed my eyes, trying to join Toby in his eventual slumber, the limiting fog of fatigue soaking into the creases of my eyelids. But when sleep stopped flirting with me and ran off to see Peter instead, I looked at the window. Or rather, at my own reflection in the dark glass – straight uncombed hair and a face that seemed mostly eyes.

But in the airport, the light was radiating. All types of people stood under its illumination as they waited to check luggage. An Asian teen with navy hair and a nose ring. Two Black women, one much older than the other, leaning into each other, each placating the other at a different energy frequency. A white woman with freshly blow-dried hair, heels, and blood-shot eyes. Kids everywhere, clutching soft things, crying or, like me, staring.

Lines moved, and people exposed their temperaments in their stance. The uptight jerkily angled their elbows and wrists. The wannabes shifted from foot-to-foot and looked to see who was looking. A draft of competence chilled me as Dansko-heeled flight attendants whisked past. Many numbed themselves from the discomfort of exposure by pouring themselves down the throats of their phones.

The gift shop, when we got nearer, seemed the source of the brightness, a beckoning sun.

Peter was snagged by the fuzzy key chains, but I soared past, straight to the wall of magazines. They dazzled, flashing yet more light with their gloss and grins. I felt a little thrill at their welcome. One model even had Sonya's coloring. Everything and anything is possible, they assured me. I only had to rise to the challenge. They would show me how.

I fingered the sharp edge of a cover, ready to take an image up on her beckoning smile.

Toby yelled. I looked behind me to see my mother prying three key chains from his clenched fist. I turned back to the magazines. Their light had contracted and collapsed.

I rifled through one, passing articles on teen gun violence, the importance of pink in makeup, and period tips. I stopped at an article about wearing your underwear as a fashion accessory. If your pants rode so low, and your cropped shirt breezed above, a high thong became a statement piece. It was an obvious "choice," the article explained, and therefore a marker of true confidence. I studied the close-up of the lacy cross of a thong waistband, framed by jean belt loops and the fringe of a cut shirt. Whoever's backside that was, the article convinced me, knew what she wanted.

Would Sonya have understood this? I did not. Mirabelle would.

Suddenly, my mom was crowding my shoulder, her arms full of Toby and five sports-capped water bottles. Toby bent and bucked, trying to get a top into his constantly gnawing mouth.

“No,” she said, staccato, her breath on my ear. “I am not buying that.”

“Just tell me when we have to leave,” I said. I knew she wouldn’t buy me a fashion magazine, but she wouldn’t rip it from my hands in a public setting either. “I don’t want anything.”

“You *can* get something else,” she said, adopting a kinder cadence.

I turned a page, trying to absorb as much as possible before we headed to our gate. My mother waited a beat, sighed, hoisted Toby further up her hip and approached the cash register.

“They don’t have what I really want anyway,” I mumbled. She didn’t hear me.

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As we funneled ourselves onto the plane, an oblivious woman with a large bag somehow stepped between me and the rest of my family. The bag knocked against seat backs, occasionally causing me to shuffle in place, as we made our way down the airplane’s esophagus.

My family was settling into seats just a few rows from the far back, close to the bathrooms. Peter claimed the one window seat and was gesturing at Mom, demanding headsets. She ignored him as she peeled Toby from herself and attempted to settle him next to Peter. Toby echoed Peter’s pleas with protests of his own.

Dad chose the aisle seat directly behind Mom. My mother was all arms, shifting around bags, looking for toys, snacks and headsets, anything to throw at the squall developing next to her. The incessant whine of the plane’s air system seemed to gather physically around her.

She didn’t look up as I approached, but Dad smiled and began to stand, gesturing to the seat next to him. The middle one. I suppressed my own tiny wail, wanting to jump out of my skin, as I swished past my father and sat down heavily. The stranger in the window seat glanced at me. I hunched forward, looking straight ahead at the blank screen on Toby’s seatback.

“I wish I had a phone,” I said, under my breath. I forced my back against the seat, sighed and closed my eyes.

“What’s that? Alice, would you like a snack? I have apples?” my mom asked from over her seat.

“I’m fine,” I said, my eyes still closed.

“What?” Mom asked again, while rustling a package of those insipid teething crackers Toby liked.

“I’m *fine*,” I said louder.

“Would you like a headset?”

“Sure,” I said, opening my eyes. I scanned my father. He was engrossed in a news article on his phone.

“I wish *I* had a phone,” I said again, this time loud enough for Dad to hear me.

“I know you do,” he said. “At least you won’t have to wait until you are thirty like I did.”

“But you have one *now*. I’m here *now*. And *now*, everybody has one. Everybody but *me*.”

My mother emerged from her bag. “I’m sorry, Alice. I can’t seem to find the other headset; we’ll ask the...”

I put my head back against the chair and pretended to close my eyes while watching my mother through a blur of lashes. She looked at Dad, threw her hands open in wide V and mouthed, “What’s with her?”

My dad shrugged. Without even bothering to lower his voice, he said, “She wants a phone.”

My mother turned quickly and slumped back into her chair, shaking her head. Toby cried for something he had just dropped. She fetched it from the floor and while handing it back to him, hissed through the seats at my father, “She barely knows herself. There’s no way I’m casting her into *that* abyss. I mean, especially after...” Her voice faltered.

My dad showed his palms. “I know how you feel about it, Rose. You asked what the problem was. I told you.”

Mom faced front quickly and became very still. My dad rubbed his forehead and went back to his article. I closed my eyes for real now. They grew hot and wet.

Perhaps I hated my mom most of all.

A new social order had been revealing itself amongst my peers, reminding me vaguely of a personified version of Peter and I’s games of poker. Classmates were realizing they had been dealt hands, and some were better than others. Previously insignificant things – like hair, voice,

and cuteness— were being evaluated and ranked, like aces, kings and queens. The rest of the game was one of strategy and secrets. That much I understood, but the actual rules and the value of my own hand, alluded me.

I assumed this knowledge was handed out through the internet and other sources of mass culture, things my parents, especially my mother, restricted. No phone, period. Limited TV. Supervised screen-time. They said I wasn't ready, didn't know myself well enough yet. They cringed when I explained the internet could *help* me learn about myself. They doubled down on these rules after Sonya.

It felt as if my mother was clasping my own cards to her chest, refusing me a peek. I was to somehow guess. Figure it out on my own. It seemed so unfair. Like I was the only kid playing poker blind.

Of course, this awareness wasn't conscious at the time. At twelve, there was just a life-or-death sensation of struggle, a clawing for knowledge and inspiration that was just out of reach, and a terrifying premonition that they might stay unobtainable forever.

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Several pretzel- and movie-filled hours later, my family was spat out of the airplane into another brightly-lit airport. "Welcome to Vacationland", a sign read, surrounded by photos of beaches, sparkling waters and pine-forest mountains, a bright red lobster and an ancient lighthouse. In smaller block letters, it read, "Portland, Maine. Yes. Life is Good Here."

My dad led the way to Baggage Claim, his head tilted back, scanning his surroundings like a great explorer. Peter scampered after him, a little hop in his step, too tired to skip, but excited all the same. He tried to ask Dad a question but went unheard. My weight was deep in my heels as I pretended I was alone, on some type of secret solo trip, maybe a spy, maybe a femme fatale, all the while maintaining a surreptitious link to Dad and Peter. My mom and Toby followed behind, a tidy knot of backpack, woman and sleeping baby.

We bunched up around carousel five. Dad pulled a cart free of its metal restraints and pushed it behind the crowd at the conveyor belt. Peter and I flopped heavily onto its slotted base, knowing full well our time there was limited.

"Is life, like, actually better here?" Peter asked.

"How should I know," I said, and started rummaging in my backpack for something to make the wait more bearable.

Peter copied me and pulled out a novel. “But I don’t get it. If life was truly better, why would it be called Vacationland? Wouldn’t people just choose to live here all the time?”

I smirked at him. “But then where would they vacation?”

“Definitely not our town!” Peter said and then laughed.

I joined him. “Some *do* actually. Maybe life’s just better on vacation?”

He met my eyes, and grew sober, before asking, “Is it?”

As the luggage bumped out of the shoot, mom’s voice reached out to Dad, quietly, confidentially. My parents thought our hearing was as bad as their own.

“Toby and Peter seem to be managing okay, but Alice, well, I’m just not sure what to do about Alice,” she said.

“Just leave well-enough alone, Rose.”

“I know. But she walks through her life so miserable, even before Sonya... It makes me even more hesitant about the whole phone thing. I mean, I personally feel bombarded by messed-up messages just walking through the *airport* and I’m an adult.”

“I should warn you: Jake and Shelly gave Mirabelle an iPad.”

“Mirabelle?! But she’s, what, nine? Ten?” Mom was not whispering anymore.

“Jake said they have put lots of parental controls on it, but Shelly’s ex is a lot more lenient with it. Also, I guess, Mirabelle has also put on some weight.”

“Well, that would go hand-in-hand with increased screen time.”

“I knew you would say that.”

“I bet that’s a landmine with those two,” she said, adjusting Toby’s weight on her hip.

“Yes. Please be careful what you say.”

“You forget I actually like the Spiegels.”

“I can’t always tell, to be honest,” Dad said.

“What? Why?”

“I mean, you and Shelly. There’s some type of spark there, and I can’t tell if it is a good spark or a bad spark. While Jake and I... Dudes just hang out. It’s not complicated.”

“Perhaps more relaxed, not less complicated.” Toby fussed and Mom gave him part of her palm to teethe on. “How *is* Jake?”

I pulled on my memories of Mirabelle, and images of her face seemed to fall around me. Ones of her laughing, pouting, sneering. The sly smile of her secret in the photo. I was two years older, but the energy between us was intense. Did she and I have “a spark?”

It had been different with Sonya; there was more a calm glow of admiration. We hadn’t even been friends. I mean, she was *fifteen*. But, at drama rehearsals, she had always taken the time to say hello. Always taken the effort to smile at me when everyone else was talking fast and paying me no attention.

And then over winter break, the news spread. *Sonya had killed herself.*

I never told anyone, but afterwards, I felt sorrier for myself than for Sonya. Shameful, I know. But she was gone, relieved of this world. And now everyone was talking about her, praising her, making an earthbound angel out of her, and claiming they were besties. There was actual competition over who had been closer to her, who had the right to be the most upset... Meanwhile, she was at peace, and I was stuck here, poring over articles, looking for a clue.

The journalists had jumped on her last online post which hinted at cyberbullying, using it and her suicide as additional data points in a nationwide, or perhaps global, trend. Sonya, of course, never used the word cyberbullying nor even hinted at any direct bullying. What she had actually wrote, in her typical calm, erudite style, was, “The messages I receive online have solidified what I know from elsewhere. I will never be good enough. I don’t have the courage to be ‘coolly different’ nor the chops to be conventionally hot. And quite frankly, I’m tired of trying when the only possibility is failure. I guess, that is it. The fatigue. I feel so, so, so *tired*, it hurts. I need the pain to stop. I hope everyone, especially my parents, will understand. I *need* it to stop. Let me at least have this.”

I didn’t understand. I could not relate to true fatigue, the way I certainly can now. And I had seen in Sonya a path to teen-hood that seemed feasible. But she hadn’t seen a path from there to adulthood.

What would I conclude when I got to her vantage point?

She planned the suicide carefully, a classic bath and razor situation, an approach that often doesn’t work. I wondered, had Sonya been aware of her success? Had it given her a last moment of pride? My mother hadn’t liked these questions.

I certainly felt something for Sonya, but not a “spark.” It was something less explosive, steadier. Mirabelle, however.