

For Simon, Rowan and Meg, with love.

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MIRROR ME



JAN DUNNING

 SCHOLASTIC

“Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror.”

OSCAR WILDE

“You don’t take a photograph, you make it.”

ANSEL ADAMS

*Come closer.
Look, and listen.
Let me be your guide, your friend.
Don't turn away.
I know how hard it is –
how flawed you are – but trust me.
It doesn't have to be that way.*

“Summer selfie! Who’s with me?”

The girl bursts out of the cafe on the heath, nearly knocking me on to the grass. Saskia Farrow, of course. With two of her followers, Ruby and Lila, close behind.

Holding her phone at arm’s length, Saskia poses like a model on a runway. The other girls squeeze into the shot beside her: a glossy three-headed beast. As Saskia shoots, they adjust their bodies and tilt their faces, their shiny, pouting lips forming tiny Os.

I stare.

How did they learn to do that?

“After some tips, Freya?” Saskia’s eyes flick to me.

I move away, my face burning. We were friends once, me and Saskia, until she dropped me in Year 8, and got herself an upgrade. It was like she'd read some secret manual over summer, one that said which clothes and hair and nails were cool.

How was I supposed to know that stuff?

The girls grab a bench and cluster round Saskia's phone.

"Oh my God, delete! Delete!"

"I look awful. Try a filter on it!"

"That *is* with a filter."

"Another one, then."

"That's worse!"

They collapse with laughter.

"You look good though, Sass."

"Yeah, amazing."

"I know." Saskia tosses her head. "Maybe I'll make it my new profile pic. After I've cropped you guys out."

The other girls nod. "Definitely."

"Oh, yeah. You should."

I pull my hoodie tight, despite the heat. If Sam could hear this, he'd be cracking up. Still, there's no denying it – when you're perfect, you're powerful. No one contradicts Saskia. You can't argue with a face like that.

Where is Sam, anyway?

I squint through the cafe window, looking for Sam's lanky frame in the queue for slushies. The sunlight turns the glass into a mirror, throwing my own face back. Dodgy skin that never tans. Wonky nose, mousy hair. Even my

freckles aren't the cute kind – more like someone opened their Coke in my face. As for my eyes, they're completely forgettable. Sam's dad's paint chart would call the colour *Drizzle*.

Yeah, I know my side of the camera.

I dig into my bag. My fingers close around cool metal, and a smile spreads over my face. *My camera*. My sixteenth birthday present from Dad, and the most precious thing I own. I lift the camera to my eye. Already I feel better, safe behind the lens. When the world shrinks down to the tiny rectangle in my viewfinder, I forget about everything, especially myself.

I look for a shot, Dad's voice in my ear. "*Find your subject, then your frame. Think about the light.*"

I zoom in on a feather, caught on a blade of grass. In my head, Dad smiles encouragement. "*Now check your focus – that's it. You've got the skills, Freya. You just need to find your voice.*"

Whatever that means.

"Ready for my close-up!" Sam's face looms, bug-eyed in my lens.

"Hey! You're messing up my shot."

"Improving it, you mean." He preens his quiff.

I hide a smile. "You've been ages."

"Queue was long. The sun's dragged *everyone* out." He glances in Saskia's direction, and waves his slushy under my nose. "We can share. Let's grab a table?"

"I have to get back."

“Already?” Sam pouts. “We’ve not been here that long. I thought you wanted to take more pictures.”

“I did. But I told Dad I wouldn’t be late.”

Sam pauses mid-slurp, as he clocks my meaning. “Wait. Back up. It’s today? She’s moving in *today*?”

I nod.

We walk towards the main road, my stomach fluttering. I don’t know why – it’s not like it’s my first time meeting Bella. Dad introduced us two weeks ago when she picked him up for one of their “dates”. I stood there, lost for words, as she smiled and shook my hand. Never in my whole life have I seen anyone who looks like that.

“Is she totally gorgeous?” Sam reads my mind.

“Well, that’s kind of in the job description.”

“*Belladonna Wilde*.” He shakes his head. “It’s surreal. She was massive, back in the day. You *seriously* had never heard of her? Sometimes I think you live under a rock. She’s all over the old *Vogues* at Mum’s salon, I can show you, if you like?”

“Maybe.” I shrug. Sam’s into that stuff, not me. He’s always watching runway shows on YouTube or makeovers on TV. Fashion and me? Let’s just say we’re not a fit.

“I can’t believe you’ll be living with a model!”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not for long. She’s ‘in between apartments’, Dad says. She’s only staying till she finds a new one.”

We cut down an alley of pastel houses and I pause, framing the rainbow colours in my lens.

Sam leans against a wall. “Aren’t you happy for him?”

“Dad? Sure. But it’s early days. They only just met.” I frown.

Two months ago, not that I’m counting. And he’s been ... different ever since.

“Hold still,” I tell Sam, pushing away the thought. The sun has cast his shadow on the wall in razor-sharp profile. I grab the shot, and turn the screen around.

“Cool.” Sam reaches for my camera. “Let me do you.”

“No, thanks.” I duck out of his way.

“Aww, Freya. Don’t feel bad.” Sam jogs to catch me up. “Not everyone can be as photogenic as me.” He sashays down the alley with a smirk. “And there’s always Photoshop. Have a word with your dad.”

I stick out my tongue. “Newsflash. He’s given that up.”

We reach the bridge at the start of my road, where Sam usually cuts back to his flat. He shuffles on the kerb, clearly angling for an invite to meet Bella. I pretend not to notice. Today is going to be awkward enough without Sam there, acting the fanboy.

“I’ll text you later. I want to download these.” I nod at my camera. It’s not even an excuse. I got some good shots today, and I want to print them out. I’m supposed to have a project to show when I start at sixth-form college.

“You’d better.” Sam warns. “I want to know *everything*. Bella Wilde’s an enigma these days. She’s, like, famously private. Almost a recluse. She hasn’t given an interview for years.”

I nod. I've googled Bella too.

"I'm relying on you to find out all her secrets!" Sam grins.

"What if she doesn't have any?" I say. "Maybe she's just ... ordinary." *An ordinary person who looks like that?* "I mean, she's dating Dad, isn't she?"

"You're probably right." Sam sighs. "She must be pretty down-to-earth. Your dad's the original Mr Nice."

Reluctantly, he saunters off.

As I open the front door, Kodak shoots out, her black-and-white tail a fuzzy brush.

"Hey, cat, what's up?" *Weird.* She never runs into the street. I chase her inside, and call down the hall. "Dad? I'm back!"

No answer.

Which isn't strange – usually he's at the camera shop till six. But he was finishing early today to help Bella settle in. Perhaps she hasn't arrived yet? Or maybe they've gone out?

I pad upstairs, my camera in my hand.

Then I freeze.

The sight steals my breath away.

Dad's bedroom door is slightly ajar, and beyond it there's a woman, standing with her back towards me, in front of a chest of drawers. She's wearing a bath robe, and gazing into a small, oval mirror on a stand. Her reflection is lit by the sun.

Bella.

It means "beautiful" in Italian. And she is.

Tumbling honey-blond hair framing a symmetrical face. Huge eyes rimmed by long, dark lashes. The daintiest of noses and full rosebud lips.

I wait for her turn, to say hello, but she doesn't move. She can't have heard me come in. She's too absorbed, gazing into the mirror. It isn't ours; she must have brought it with her. The frame is dark and dainty, carved with twisting stems. So out of place next to Dad's Ikea pine.

Bella leans in further, her face pressed close to the glass. As she stares, I count the seconds. *Six ... seven ... eight...* Will she ever blink? Then she licks her lips. The intimate gesture makes me flinch.

I should go. Her beauty routine is none of my business. I've got photos to download.

But I stay where I am. My eyes are glued to her face. There's no other word except ... *flawless.*

I wonder how it feels.

I lift up my camera. *One quick shot. She'll never know.*

As I press the shutter button, Bella clears her throat. I jerk down my camera, sweat prickling my forehead. Her lips are moving – she's whispering – but not to me.

She's talking to the *mirror.*

OK, that's definitely weird.

Her voice is a murmur, impossible to make out. Perhaps she's praying? Dad never said she was the religious type.

Goosebumps pepper my arms. For a second, the surface of the mirror seems to distort, rippling like pebbles in a pond.

No.

I blink, and everything's back to normal. The mirror is old, that's all. The glass is cloudy and cracked. *Typical Freya, overreacting.* I'm not a fan of mirrors at the best of times.

Bella has fallen silent. I stare at her perfect face. Her eyes are closed, and her cheeks are flushed. If it's even possible, she looks brighter, more vivid than before.

She stretches, and I jump. A floorboard creaks.

Bella spins around. "Freya?"

"Hi." My mouth is dry. I feel like an intruder, but that's silly. This is my house. Mine and Dad's.

"I didn't hear you there." Her face is hard to read. A citrusy scent reaches me as she comes towards the door.

"Where's Dad?" I ask, shifting uncomfortably. Her gaze is intense, like a spotlight.

"He went to get something for dinner." Bella's eyes land on my camera. She frowns. "Did you...?"

I flush.

"May I see?"

Without waiting for a reply, she lifts the camera from my hands. She scrolls through the images on the display: the pictures I took earlier on the heath.

"Goodness, you're quite the photographer." She blinks. "I didn't know."

I shrug.

"The thing is, Freya." Bella moves closer. "If you wanted to take my picture, you should really have asked me first."

"I know," I mumble. "I'm sorry."

"As we're going to be living together, we should respect each other's privacy. Don't you think?"

I manage a nod. I'm too mesmerized by her face. Her eyes are a shade of green I've never seen in real life, and her skin is like wax – not a single pore.

"It's OK. No harm done." Bella holds out my camera, like a peace offering. "Let's forget all about this and start afresh. Don't worry, I won't mention it to Nick." She smiles serenely.

I take my camera, and she gently shuts the door.

I stand in the hallway for a moment. My head feels strangely foggy. Pulling myself together, I stumble to my room.

Connect my camera to my laptop. Switch to image playback, ready to download.

Wait. What?

I stare at the screen.

It's blank. Empty. Nothing to import.

The photographs on my camera are all gone.