

Stevie in the Mirror

I can see right away it's a nuthouse. The caseworker doesn't even come inside, just turns me over to Hennessey and drives off before the steel door clunks shut behind me. At first I feel that burning behind my eyes, but I swallow a bunch of times to get it down inside. I haven't cried for years—no sense breaking my record now.

I stand there looking down this mile-long corridor while Hennessey flips through the papers on me. No pictures on the walls. Not a candy wrapper on the floor. Lights so dim you can barely see your own shoes. Way down the hall one of those heavy doors squeaks open and somebody laughs, loud, like nothing's funny, like *Listen to this one* or *I'll show you*, and then the door bangs closed and the sound is trapped inside again.

"Stephanie Ingersoll," he says, reading it off the page. It doesn't seem to be a name that interests him very much, but he sticks his hand out sideways and glances at me anyway. "I'm John Hennessey. I'm a counselor on the Girls' Unit. Since it's so late, we'll just find you a bed tonight. We can talk tomorrow."

I'm not about to shake his germ hand. And we can put that talk off forever for all I care. "My name is Stevie," I tell him, to get that much straightened out. "Nobody calls me Stephanie."

"Okay, Stevie." He pretends to be an agreeable guy.

"This is a place for wackos, right?"

He laughs. "I know it looks formidable at night, but in the light of day—"

"I'm only a runaway, you know. I'm no fruitcake. All I did was run away from home!"

Hennessey—who's butt ugly and has these vein-popping muscles—he does this real slow look down my arm until his eyes bounce off the bandage on my wrist. Like that tells him all he needs to know. He doesn't have a clue.

"Mama! Mama!" is all I hear when I come to the next morning. For a minute I don't remember where I am, and then, when I do, I think I might puke. There's a giant doll leaning over me, its big plastic eyes staring into mine, and somebody must have pulled her chain. Either that or this is an actual human nut.

"Mama!" she screams at me again.

"Oh, Patsy, you woke Stevie, didn't you?" A skinny woman with a chest like a bird comes running into the room where I'm quickly waking up. I'm not in one of the real bedrooms, just a room off the staff area that has a couch in it. Hennessey put me there last night so he wouldn't have to wake anybody. And now I know why—when the cuckoos are quiet, you don't want to get them riled up.

"I'm Carol Ann," the skinny woman says. "And this is Patsy." The giant Kewpie is rolling her eyes around in her head. Carol Ann tells me most of the other girls are having breakfast and I should wash up quickly and she'll take me over and introduce me to everybody. I can hardly wait.

Last night when I couldn't get to sleep, I was thinking about who all these crazy kids were going to be. I saw *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* last year. I figure they'll all be drugged stupid, mumbling and slobbering. But at first when I walk into the cafeteria, it doesn't look that different from a regular high school—not as many kids and all girls, but they're just talking and shouting, no more out of control than most kids who've been locked up in classrooms all day. Of course these girls are locked up *all* the time, day and night.

At Bellweather Country Day School, where I go, or rather, where I *used* to go—I don't think they let you come back once you've sliced up your arm in the girls' shower and gotten blood all over their disinfected white tiles—at that school for pussies, I scared kids. I have this look: I make my face very still and hard and I stare at you. I call it my Deranged Killer Look. It means *Leave me alone, get out of my way, I'm dangerous*. The kids at Bellweather believed it.

Carol Ann gets me a breakfast tray and leads me over to a table of girls. I put on my D.K. Look so they get the idea who I am, and I sit down next to this pudgy person with stringy blond hair that hasn't seen shampoo in quite some time. Carol Ann makes the introductions.

"Girls, this is Stevie. She came in last night. This is Brooke, Rosemary, Latasha, and down at the end is Zena."

For some reason I look first at Zena, maybe because she's the farthest away from me. The Look is going full blast as I stare her down. But I can see immediately my eyes could be crossed and my tongue could be hanging out and this Zena wouldn't know the difference. I could be wagging my tail and barking.

Zena doesn't see me or anybody else. The pointer finger of her right hand is bobbing up and down like she's lecturing somebody, except nobody is sitting across from her and she isn't saying anything, just letting this dumb smile come and go across her face, like there's some joke being told inside her brain. My D.K. Look deteriorates into plain old staring.

"Hey, Brooke! Another A.S. You've got company!" Rosemary, the stringy blonde who's sitting next to me points to my bandage.

"Shut up, asshole," is all Brooke says.

"What's an A.S.?" I don't want to sound dumb, but the Look is not impressing anybody, so I better figure out the lingo if I'm going to be here for a while.

"Attempted suicide. You're the third one this month. Not Miss Originality, though. Brooke here would never stoop to something as ordinary as a slit wrist, would you, bitch?"

Brooke doesn't say anything, but she gives me and Rosemary both a Deranged Killer Look that's a lot more convincing than mine.

"Whatayou always wanna start something for, Rosemary?" Latasha says. She takes her fork and bounces it across the table so it lands with a splash in Rosemary's milk glass. "Can't you ever just shut up? Or you need me to *help* you shut up?"

Nobody says anything for a minute, and my first spoonful of cereal is about halfway to my mouth when all of a sudden Rosemary jumps to her feet, picks up her breakfast tray, and throws it at Latasha. Damn! She bumps me and my food spills everywhere, plus I get some of the splashback from Rosemary's all over my best Pumpkins T-shirt.

But before I can even move over or figure out what to do next, Latasha is up and walking right across the table, going for Rosemary's neck. Her chair falls over and then she does too, and Latasha is on top of her on the floor, the two of them rolling around in puddles of orange juice and Cheerios.

It only takes a few seconds before Carol Ann and two other counselors drag them apart, but they're still swearing and spitting at each other. And when they pull them to their feet, I'm amazed to see that Rosemary is as pregnant as a big old cow. As pregnant as my stupid mother.

"Time-Out rooms for both of you," Carol Ann announces, and they're muscled out of the cafeteria in different directions, still yelling.

"You'll get used to it," Brooke tells me. "Everybody in here fights all the time. Nothing else to do. Except sleep."

"You're in here because of your . . . A.S.?" I ask her.

"Yeah. You, too, I guess," she says.

"I'm mostly here because I ran away. After my dad died and my mom married this jerk, I couldn't hack it at home anymore. So they had me locked up. This thing"—I wave my wrist—"I didn't even mean it. It was just something to do."

Brooke gives a grunt. "Don't tell anybody *that*. Being a runaway is too wimpy. Play up the suicide thing."

"How did you do it? Your A.S."

"Hanging," Brooke says, pulling out the neck of her T-shirt with one finger so I can see the meaty red scar, an ugly necklace. "I meant it."

"Most of the girls already have roommates," Carol Ann is explaining. "But there are beds available in Patsy's room and in Zena's."

Latasha, who got out of Time-Out before Rosemary because she didn't spend her first lockup hour screaming, hears what we're talking about.

"Come on, Carol Ann, you can't make her sleep in the same room with Patsy. Shit, this girl already tried to kill herself once!"

I'm not nuts about the choice either. Patsy's as creepy as they come, with her googly eyes spinning in circles, but Zena's a few sandwiches short of a picnic too.

Carol Ann puts her finger to her lips. "Latasha, please! Patsy will hear you!"

"Patsy doesn't know what the hell I'm talking about." She turns to me. "Patsy doesn't use the bathroom—you know what I'm saying? She just does it wherever. Her room smells like a sewer."

My jaw drops open. They'd make me sleep in a room with somebody who messes in her pants? *I am* in hell.

Carol Ann smiles one of those bullshit smiles grown-ups give you when they're pretending they're on your side. "Well, I'm thinking Zena might be the better choice anyway. She's making progress these days."

“Right,” Latasha says, laughing. “Hey, let’s get Zena to play her song for the new girl. What’s your name again?”

I tell her, but she isn’t really listening. She’s yelling to Zena, who could be deaf for all the notice she takes. Zena’s standing in the corner having another silent conversation with somebody; her mouth moves and that finger points, but there’s nobody there to hear whatever she isn’t saying. Latasha doesn’t give up. She takes Zena by the arm and leads her to a couch. “Sit here,” she commands. “I’m getting your guitar.”

At the word *guitar*, Zena stops “talking” and sits quietly, waiting. Latasha is back in a minute with the guitar and hands it to Zena, who immediately puts the strap over her shoulder and gives a strum.

“Hey, everybody!” Latasha yells. “Zena’s gonna sing her song.” Then she turns to me and says, “You won’t believe this. She wrote it herself.”

Girls come out of their rooms, stop talking, gather around. Even the counselors stop pretending they have a lot of important work to do and look up.

Zena doesn’t seem to even know we’re there. She puts her head back and lets out a sound almost like a howl, except that it’s beautiful. And then she sings her song. I’ve never heard anything like it.

OHHHH! Look into the mirror. Look into the wall.

I can see your inside. I can see it all.

You cannot escape me, even if you try.

What a little baby. Don’t forget to cry.

OHHHH! My face is all muddy. You think that’s a shame.

Wash away the colors. Wash away the pain.

You will hold my hand and look into my eyes.

Wash away the mother. Wash away the lies.

*You might think there’s one of me,
a certain shape and size.*

*But one prefers the hello kiss,
and the other loves good-byes.*

Look into the mirror! Look into my eyes!

You cannot see anything. But I’m alive!

OHHHH! Look into the mirror. Look into the wall.

I can see your inside. I can see it all.

You cannot escape me, even if you try.

What a little baby. Don’t forget to cry.

She holds the last note until it *is* a cry. I can't explain what Zena sounds like: one minute like a shy little kid and the next like some real gutsy singer, Tori Amos or somebody. Most of the verses have kind of a simple melody, almost like a nursery rhyme, and then in the middle, the second time she says, "Look into the mirror," she starts to kind of wail. It's almost scary.

Everybody claps and hoots, but Zena doesn't even smile. She takes the guitar off and lays it on the couch, gets up, and walks back into the corner to finish that conversation she was having with nobody. Or maybe with herself. My new roommate.

There's a Boys' Unit here too, which I figured there was, but I don't see any of them until today when we have Outdoor Recreation together. Which turns out to be baseball. God, I hate baseball. It seems like everybody else does too. Well, not everybody in the world, obviously, maybe just us lunatics.

Not that I'm that much like the other kids. The girls are pretty equally divided between the totally gonzo types like Patsy and Zena, and the completely furious, violent ones like Rosemary and Latasha. I don't even fit in with the other two A.S. girls, both of whom really wanted to die. I guess I just wanted somebody to pay some attention to me. At least that's what Hennessey gets me to admit right away in our first counseling session Yawn. I'll say whatever I have to to get out of this place.

Anyway, the boys are just as crazy as the girls, but at first I don't think they are. I see this one guy, Victor, and I think he's really cute. We get picked for the same team, which means at least there's a lot of time to sit around on the bench and wait to get up to bat, and I manage to get myself sitting next to him. Rosemary's on the loose again and she's sitting on my other side, and she keeps up this constant laughing and blabbing, saying stuff like, "What a cute couple," and "Stevie's got a boyfriend *already!*" I figure she's just jealous, so I ignore her.

Victor's not saying too much, but he's got the sweetest smile and he's really looking deep into my eyes and I'm starting to think maybe this place won't be so bad, when Rosemary pokes her bony elbow into my side.

I turn around and glare at her. "What do you want!"

"I think Victor wants you to see something," she says, snorting with laughter. "He's got his horse out of the barn again." She motions toward his lap and I turn to see what the hell she's talking about, and then I see that Victor's got his fly open and his dick is actually lying out there in his lap!

I give a loud shriek and jump up and fall over Rosemary's big legs, which are stretched out around her huge stomach. I'm sitting there in the dust while Victor and Rosemary are in hysterics. Not for long, though. Woody, one of the Boys' Unit counselors, figures out right away what's going on and yanks Victor off the bench.

"Tuck it in, buddy," he tells him. "You're in Time-Out for the foreseeable future."

Carol Ann hightails it over to me. "You okay?"

"What the hell!" I say. "What's wrong with that guy?"

She takes me aside so the stupid game can continue. “Victor has a problem knowing how to act around women. He’s gotten better, but when there’s somebody new here, he likes to see if he can shock her. Sorry, Stevie. I should have warned you.”

“Damn right you should have.” My heart’s banging away in my chest so hard it reminds me of the night my mother announced she was “bringing new life into the world,” which was an ever bigger shock to my system than this little deviant’s pecker. My mother and that goofy Jake, so thrilled to be populating the planet with a tiny replica of themselves. I thought I was going to break into little pieces that night. Maybe I did. People are so damn dumb. All they think about is themselves. They don’t even think what a terrible effect they’re having on other people.

“What makes Victor do that?” I ask Carol Ann.

She shrugs. “A lot of kids here will do whatever it takes to be noticed.”

“Well, that’s a crappy way to get attention,” I say. Although, when I think about it, none of the rest of us has such a great way either.

Zena’s crying wakes me up, so I go over and shake her a little bit. She stops crying and looks at me, and for just a second I can see somebody in there, somebody at home behind those eyes. But just for a second, and then they get unfocused again and she turns onto her back to stare up at the ceiling.

I get back in bed, but now I’m awake. “How come you were crying?” I ask her. I don’t usually bother to try to talk to Zena. On the first day we were roommates I figured out I was lucky to get her because she’s quiet most of the time and she doesn’t pay any attention to anybody anyway, so it’s almost like not having a roommate at all. But I’d never heard her cry before, and I’d never seen her look back at me.

Of course she doesn’t answer me, but for some reason, I start to hum her song. I’ve heard her sing it a few times now and it’s hard to forget. It’s the kind of song my mother would call “haunting.” Zena doesn’t move.

“Did your mother do something to you?” I ask her. “The part about ‘wash away the mother, wash away the lies’—what does that mean?”

Still no sound from Zena, but she does roll over onto her side so that she’s facing me. It’s too dark and I’m too far away to see where her eyes are looking though.

“My mother is the reason I’m here too,” I tell her. “She’s having a baby with her new husband, who’s an idiot. And she thinks I ought to be happy about it. I haven’t been happy in four years—not since my dad died—I’m sure not going to be happy about *this!*”

I don’t know if Zena understands a word I say—she’s as quiet as a corpse—but for some reason, I really like talking to her. It seems to me she’s listening, but not the way most of my friends listen for a few minutes and then get tired of it and say, “Wait till you hear what *my* mother did,” and then they go off on some totally irrelevant story. Like my problem is in the same league with them not being allowed to have their own phone or something. Of course, everybody else at this place has such gigantic problems I don’t bother to tell them mine. They’d think *I* was talking about telephones.

“Sometimes I think there’s more than one of me too,” I tell Zena. “Is that what happened to you? All the pieces split apart?” The silence is fine. It’s comfortable. I start to feel tired again. “Zena,” I whisper to her. “If you need to cry again, go ahead. I won’t stop you.”

She doesn’t cry anymore that night, but every few nights I hear her sobbing. I want to stop her because it makes me feel sad too, but I don’t. You can’t break a promise to Zena.

“Carol Ann tells me you and Zena are getting to be friends,” Hennessey says during one of our regular late-afternoon appointments. He’s my therapist. He’s supposed to help me figure myself out before I’m sent back into the so-called *real* world. Here in therapy-world I sit in a comfy chair and pretend this old guy is my buddy. There’s one of those trick mirrors on one wall of the room, as if there’s somebody alive who doesn’t know you can see through it from the other side. I like to pretend there’s a mirror between me and Hennessey, too. That I can see him but he can’t see me. Not really.

I give this little snort. “Friends? How can you be friends with somebody who doesn’t talk? I mean, I like her all right. I like to hear her sing.”

“You like her song?”

“Yeah. Everybody does. I wish she’d write some more.”

“Her mother told me she wrote ‘Look into the Mirror’ right before she stopped communicating with people.”

“If her mother even *knows*,” I say.

“Why do you say that?” Hennessey wants to know.

I shrug. “The song doesn’t make her mother sound like much of a saint.”

Hennessey nods. “True, but then most mothers aren’t saints.”

“Maybe not, but most mothers *look* at their kids, most mothers have a *clue* about what’s going on with their kids, most mothers don’t *lie* to you!”

“Are we talking about most mothers now, or are we talking about *your* mother?” I love the way these shrinks get you tied up in your own knots. I decide not to answer that question. Hennessey thinks he’s got me all figured out anyway, that everything I say and do is about my mother and what he calls her “betrayal.”

“I think it might be a good time for your mother to come and visit, don’t you? She’s been asking to come, but I want you to feel you’re ready.”

This is one of the few things in my life I have any control over, especially here in the nuthouse. But as soon as I let her come, I give that up. She’s in charge again.

“I don’t want to see her. I’m not ready.” There, I’ve made Hennessey frown.

When I wake up, Zena’s sitting up in her bed already, staring at her hand.

“What are you looking at?” I ask her. I’m surprised when she turns her head toward me as though she might actually answer. There she is, behind her eyes, alive. Then she turns back to her hand.

I've been wondering lately how much of it is your own choice. Sometimes when I watch Zena or Patsy or even one of the wild girls, like Rosemary, I can imagine becoming just like them. I'd just need to *want* to. I'd just have to let go, give up, fall apart, go crazy. I think I could do it. It would be nice in a way. No responsibilities. I wouldn't even be expected to talk to Hennessey. I could go far away inside myself where my mother would never find me. I could hide. The problem is, once you let go, how do you come back? What if you get as lost as Zena?

"Are you hiding, Zena?" I ask her. "You don't have to hide from me."

"Hi, Victor." We're having a picnic with the Boys' Unit. By the pond. The one pretty place we're allowed to go, and not that often either. Victor hasn't tried anything on me since that one time. I think he mostly likes surprising people.

"Hi, Stevie. I heard Rosemary had a boy."

I nod. "This morning. She'll be back here tomorrow."

"She had to give it away, huh?"

I laugh. "They don't let fifteen-year-old nut jobs take care of babies. Pass me a tuna fish sandwich."

He hands me two. "Couldn't her mother have taken it or something? Until Rosemary got old enough?"

I shrug. "Her mother didn't do such a great job with Rosemary. The kid is better off adopted. They'll give him to some family who's just dying for a baby."

"I bet Rosemary's sad, though. It would be fun to have a baby, don't you think?"

"*Fun?* It's not about having fun, Victor. If you don't do a good job, you get a bunch of screwed-up kids like us."

He smiles. "What's so bad about us?"

Victor is cute, but he is really stupid.

This morning Latasha and a new girl, Wendy, got into a big fight, with Rosemary egging them on. For a change Carol Ann and the others weren't watching our every move—they were admiring their new coffeemaker—and before they got to them, Latasha had a broken nose and a big clump of Wendy's hair in her hand. There was blood all over the place and Patsy started wailing. I didn't even blame her—I felt like crap too.

I'm really getting tired of this place now. Two days ago Brooke ran away during a trip downtown. It's this big privilege to get to go, and the minute she gets out of the van she takes off. Of course they caught her right away, and now she's in Extended Time-Out, probably forever. I saw her when they brought her back. She looked like a Deranged Killer, but I'm pretty sure the person she was hoping to kill was herself.

I don't know who makes the choice, whether you make it yourself, or whether all the circumstances of your life decide for you. Or maybe it's a little of both. I just know I'm tired of being afraid of Rosemary, and I'm tired of feeling sorry for Patsy, and I'm tired of watching

Brooke hate herself, and I'm tired of eating and sleeping and going to the bathroom when Carol Ann tells me to, and I'm tired of keeping Hennessey on the other side of the mirror.

I don't belong here. I never did. They only put me here because my mother was so scared. She thought one day she'd find me hanging from a branch of the Norway maple, like Brooke's mother did. I probably should tell her that whole wrist-cutting thing was a lie. If it's my choice, I think I'm ready to stop hiding. I wish Zena was too.

"Tell my mother she can come and visit," I tell Hennessey.

"Are you sure?" he asks. Funny, the guy's not as ugly as he used to be.

I nod. "It doesn't seem like such a big deal anymore. So she has a new husband and a baby. It doesn't change who I am."

He's grinning. "I'm glad you can see that."

"Yeah. I figure when the kid gets old enough, like when Mom and Jake start bugging her, I'll tell her all about my dad, how cool he was."

Hennessey is thrilled. "That's wonderful, Stevie. You've done good work in here. I think you'll be able to go home soon."

"Can't wait," I say. "The food here sucks."

God, he's about ready to bust a gut. I bet he thinks *he* fixed me. *Please*. Get the guy a medal.

She seems better now in the mornings, not so much of that pointing and mumbling. Sometimes she stays in our room and plays chords on the guitar. I think she might be starting to write a new song. She sings so low I can't make out the words, but it's definitely a new tune. Whenever anybody comes in she stops, but she doesn't mind me listening. We're sort of friends.

"Zena, I have to tell you something," I say. She doesn't look at me, but I know she's listening. "I think they're going to let me go home this week. I talked to my mother."

When I say the word mother, Zena looks at me. Her eyes are clear. Then she looks back at the guitar strings, plays a few chords.

"It wasn't that bad. I was really mad at her, you know? But then, when I actually saw her, it was okay. Like maybe part of it was in my head. She was really happy to see me. She says she wants me to come home, even though I messed up before. She's having her baby in a month. Which is weird, but I guess I can live with it." I almost don't say it and then I do. "Your mother is probably worse than mine, isn't she?"

Zena stops strumming and lays the guitar next to her on the bed.

"If you get better, you can come and visit me," I tell her. "Would you like that? You could sleep overnight in my room and we could pretend we were still roommates."

She's looking at me now. Her mouth moves, but she isn't talking to herself this time.

"What did you say?" I get up and sit next to her on her bed so I can hear better. "Did you say something to me?"

She leans over and whispers it. "Don't forget," she says.

“Don’t forget what?” Zena is talking to me! I want her to tell me everything she knows!
“You mean, don’t forget *you*? I never will.”
She leans in again. “Don’t forget to cry,” Zena says.
And so I do.

THE END

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