

Hidden

by Kosta Angelou

A sample of the opening pages

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Chapter 1

It's quiet here...

There's something familiarly comforting and frightening about such intense quiet.

Looking out the window, it looks as if everything is standing still--almost as if time has stopped--as if the frame of the window suddenly became a frame of an old and sad painting. There are no birds flying around. No people walking by. Just two lonely and aged trees standing tall and bare; two trees that have been here a lot longer than I have.

My window, old and aged, has been standing the test of time, too. Full of dirt and grunge, the frame rotting and falling apart all around, creating refuge for the dust which seems to have been accumulating here. I catch myself at times staring out this filthy glass, but the only thing I manage to see is the reflection of my face as if the window has become a mirror. As if the window was trying to tell me something, as if it was forcing me to look at myself.

My room no bigger than a prison cell--at least it feels this way to me--is a constant contrast of how things used to be. Ten years, but nothing has changed. They told me it would get better, but it hasn't. Everything remains static. Change is a notion that won't be. It has become a mere thought, an idea. It has become hope.

My bed sits on the right side, against the wall, between the window and the double glass security door. Quite simple in its description, the bed resembles one of the World War II metal frame beds used in hospitals all over Europe. A thin mattress and a brown blanket on it, covering what I guess used to be white sheets and pillow. On the wall over my bed, there is a picture I painted of a woman. Her eyes are so real; they feel like they're staring at me constantly. Dark, brown eyes full of mystery and a sad expression make it seem she has a story to tell. I talk to her from time to time, carrying on conversations with her for hours; pretending she can really hear me or will have something to say back. I call her Sarah. There is no significance to the name I chose for her; it's simply a name I have always been fond of.

There are no distractions here. I find it comforting talking to Sarah, as it helps me escape the reality that has been created for me. A reality, I guess, thought to be necessary. To find oneself

you have to search deep within. You have to look inside your mind, inside your soul, inside your heart. This was a first for me. It was something I avoided. Something I always put off for another day. Maybe I knew. Maybe I knew what I would find. It's possible I just didn't want to accept the life I had created.

Across from my bed, there is an old dresser with aged brass handles. Everything I own right now is stored in those drawers. It's a sort of metaphoric timeline representing my life from beginning until now; every drawer a different period of my life. Memories of my life before here are constantly running through my mind. How it used to be, maybe even how it could have been. Sometimes I wonder, yet all these thoughts, all this free time seem like a perfect match to help me heal from within.

The floor is bare. No carpet or rug to cover the nakedness of the aging wood, which at some point--a long time ago--stood below me with a glowing sheen, only to eventually be forgotten; perhaps the same way everyone in here has been forgotten. A small wooden chair that sits on the side of the dresser sometimes becomes my tool to fight it all. Placing it next to the window, I sit there and stare out for hours. I stare grimly outside, not looking at anything in particular. A blank look with no movement or expression is eminent proof of my constant voyage to deep thoughts.

Yet, I'm not trapped in this room, I choose to sit alone. I do find myself trapped from within, though. Such a vast array of emotions restricts me from letting go.

Surrounded by so much insecurity, I feel unable to allow feelings to surface. All hidden and oppressed, deep inside for years, meanwhile the process that has so far proven to be ineffective, keeps me here--a process that was supposed to help. It is ironic how my life continues to move in circles, often going back to the beginning, where it all started. Feeling lost and helpless was a thing of the past, but somehow it follows me to today. I can't seem to recall the last time I smiled. There's nothing that can bring warmth and glee to my heart and soul. The kind of warmth and happiness a little boy feels when his father buys him a chocolate cone with sprinkles at the park. A tiny, yet so important detail that would bring a smile to my face is missing. Instead, I have learned to accept this colorless realm and have settled in to the balance I have created. It is allowing me to continue.

There are many others here; probably left feeling the way I do, with similar uncertainties, with the same feeling of emptiness inside, with the same questions. I've been told interacting with them will help me. It would create a state of security knowing I am not alone. For the most part, we are all gathered in the sitting area. A room big enough for all of us here, I guess. Three couches with visible wear and several stains, together with a few chairs surround the television set. Several shows and movies during the day keep almost everyone occupied. Not me, though. I choose to sit by myself, still hesitant to interact. Afraid that allowing others into my realm might jeopardize this mindset and understanding with which I have become content.

The nurses' station, placed diagonally behind our living area encourages everyone to follow procedure and behave expectedly. Occasionally somebody tends to forget what procedure means in here, but the uniforms remind them quite quickly. Through the years, I have had my share of such reminders and have quickly learned that time goes by a lot faster and smoother when rules are followed. I have even begun to receive special treatment for my good behavior. I suppose good behavior in conjunction with my extended stay in here gives them a sense of comfort around me. I welcome it every time, but I never show anyone. They are allowing me to spend time outside without significant supervision. Being by the lawn allows for a different kind of thinking. Feeling the air, smelling the flowers, seeing the clouds endlessly creating different shapes in the sky, tends to make you forget--even temporarily. Earning this privilege has given me the opportunity to escape, to think, even to express myself. Most of it comes in the form of painting. A few of the nurses, who through the years have shown special interest in me, provide me with paint, brushes, and canvases.

Painting has always been something I enjoyed. Expressing thoughts, creating something only I could imagine, traveling in places only I know existed. Yet lately all I've been painting is a woman--every few days a different portrayal of the same figure. Sometimes her whole face, sometimes just her eyes. Sometimes just the shape of her face, but with no features. I don't know why, but while I sit there in the yard next to the water fountain, I paint her over and over again. Always her, always sad.

Maybe I mean to do it. Maybe subconsciously the relaxing sound of the water trickling down the sides of the fountain creates saddened thoughts. Thoughts that are already there--simply surfacing--coming from deep inside, traveling throughout my entire body and mind for years, end up on the tip of my paintbrush.

I spend a lot of time by the water fountain. In a way, the water reminds me of myself. A metaphor for my life in here--constantly flowing from above and softly falling down, long enough to make the same cycle again without escape. Doing the same thing repeatedly without the hope of anything ever changing--forced to settle for that reality. And what is reality? Is it something we create and accept as the norm? Is it a notion of something that is or could be? Or is it something created by others we are forced to believe? Should I accept this state I'm in as reality or as something made up, and just like the water in the fountain, tolerate it only because there is nothing else?

I live with those questions and try to figure them out. Try to understand them. Try to accept them. And through them try to find myself.

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Chapter 2

The squeaky sound of my door opening...

"Good morning David, what are you still doing in bed?" said Jeff with a soft yet firm voice.

Jeff is the orderly here. He's been taking care of the others and me since I first came to this place. He is a white man in his early fifties slightly on the heavy side with salt and pepper hair.

"It's almost eleven a.m. and you're still sleeping?" He continued as he made his way closer to the bed.

"There's nothing wrong. I just felt like staying in my room today," I replied shortly, almost as if I was trying to avoid conversation with him. The truth is I always enjoyed talking to him, and he enjoyed listening. I usually woke up early; somehow, today I felt the need to stay in my room.

"I have your breakfast and your candy."

Candy, as he referred to it, was my medication. He often chose to call it that because he knew how much I hated taking it. An attempt to make things easier for the both of us, I suppose; even more so, an effort to befriend me over time. Whichever the case, I have to admit it did work for the most part.

He laid the tray on the chair next to my bed long enough to unfold the little table leaning on the side of the dresser, continuing to talk, inviting me to engage in a conversation.

"It's a beautiful, warm, sunny morning. Not a single cloud in the sky," he said. "You should enjoy it and go outside to have your breakfast."

I looked out the window, just as Jeff began cracking it open, attempting to prove his point to me. A warm breeze entered the room, bringing the smell of fresh cut grass together with the crisp morning air. It seemed beautiful indeed. What had started as a day probably spent in bed, had suddenly transformed to a day with more to offer.

"Jeff, let me ask you," I replied, "all those years here stuck with me, haven't you gotten tired of trying?" I didn't have to be specific. He knew I was referring to his efforts to get me out of this room and spend some time outside. He knew I was a stubborn man, and going outside occurred only when I wanted to. It was almost pointless for him to try to get me out of the room. He didn't give up, though. My question brought a smirk to his face as he was making his way to the door again.

"One can only hope, David, one can only hope. I'll see you again at three," he said as he was closing the door behind him. The word hope lingered in the room for a while longer, long enough to make it in my head and settle in.

Jeff always spoke using positive words. A bright man, with a good heart and concern for others, often used his abilities to brighten people's gloomy thoughts. After all, he managed through the years to make me open up to him. He didn't know much about me but somehow he was beginning to. His kindness was slowly beginning to break through the wall I had built.

I sat on the edge of my bed looking outside. It seemed like everyone was taking advantage of

this beautiful morning. I don't recall ever seeing so many people out at the same time and, with that observation, a sudden feeling of envy took over inside me. A feeling that disappeared as quickly as it came.

"I don't want to go out there," I shouted aloud, becoming rather edgy and puzzled by my abrupt reaction.

"Stay focused, David," I mumbled. "Don't lose your self-control." Self-control was something that, throughout the years, had become the focus of my struggles.

I proceeded to get dressed, pausing to take a bite of my buttered toast with jelly. My eyes gazing out the window, looking with despair to the right side of the lawn where everybody was gathered. So many people, so many problems--and yet they all found the strength to push them aside for a while and socialize with each other. Talking, laughing, and walking around, completely oblivious to their problems. Not me, though. I liked it better this way.

Some time had passed when I realized the only thing left on my tray was my "candy." I placed the pills in my mouth with hesitation, like every other time, and with a swift motion washed them down my throat using my almost empty glass of orange juice. I shook my head quickly left to right with a sickened grimace. I hated taking them. I never really liked medications. I preferred suffering to actually seeking the help of drugs. I hated what they did to me and how they made me feel. But this was different. I had to take them. It was sort of my compromise for being here, and wanting to get better.

The afternoon passed pleasantly and unusually fast, as I looked out the window allowing, even for a moment, my mind to be care and worry free.

"Is it possible for a single word to change the outcome of a whole mindset?" I recall wondering, referring to hope--the word Jeff said before leaving this morning. I didn't believe a single word could possess so much power. Then again, I wasn't sure anymore. How else could I have explained today? A slight smile and a baffled look appeared simultaneously on my face as I wondered about the turn today's events had taken.

This is something I really need to add to my diary, I thought. I've been writing as long as I can remember, filling the pages with every thought, every emotion, every experience in my life.

I remember Mrs. Randall, my seventh grade English teacher, who had said, "A diary is a window to our lives only oneself is allowed to look out from."

I didn't understand what she meant then, but I do now. The diaries that filled my dresser drawers let me go back. They allowed me to revisit and relive any day of my life. The last few years I have only been writing though, lacking the need to read. Lacking the need to revisit my past.

"A diary is a good way to get away from our troubles, simply by recognizing them. Reliving the day's events helps you realize what brings joy, what angers you, what you don't want to do again."

I guess now I understand what Mrs. Randall was trying to say.

"Where is your mind traveling to again?" Jeff asked.

I was so absorbed in my thoughts that I failed to realize he had opened my squeaky door and had entered the room.

"Hey Jeff," I answered. "I didn't realize it was three o'clock already. Done for the day?"

He nodded as he made it to the chair, next to the window.

"Yeah, I'm done."

It had become a ritual between us. Every afternoon at three, after his shift was over, Jeff visited for a couple of hours. I don't think it was all for me, but for him as well. I believe he was learning from me, or perhaps just listening to all I had to say helped him realize just how fortunate he really was.

"I brought you your lunch and newspaper," he said. "I didn't leave the paper this morning 'cause you were still in bed."

"Anything good today?" I asked, referring to today's news.

"No, not really. Same as any other day, I guess," he said, and set the tray and paper on the dresser.

"I'm really not that hungry, not yet at least," I replied. "I ate my breakfast kinda late today. Thanks for my paper. I thought you forgot it today." I always enjoyed reading it, even though most days the articles and stories seemed to be more of the same.

There was something about finding out important or life changing news through the paper that always disturbed me. It did, however help me make the days go faster. Most importantly though, it was my window to the outside world. It was pretty interesting watching life move so fast out there and yet it seemed so static in here. Things had changed so much, and for the most part, it seemed like it was for the worst. I could tell by the articles that crimes were turning more violent, people getting more desperate, stories becoming sadder.

End of sample

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