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Perfectly Reflected

Written by

S. C. Ransom

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Perfectly Reflected

S.C.Ransom



'Small Blue Thing'

Today I am
A small blue thing
Like a marble
Or an eye

With my knees against my mouth
I am perfectly round
I am watching you

I am cold against your skin
You are perfectly reflected
I am lost inside your pocket
I am lost against
Your fingers
I am falling down the stairs
I am skipping on the sidewalk
I am thrown against the sky
I am raining down in pieces

.....

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For Mum and Dad

PERFECTLY REFLECTED

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Caution

Breaking glass exploded into my bedroom. The cold, early morning air rushed in as I leapt up and pushed my feet into my flip-flops, not sure for a moment if I had been dreaming. The crunch of glass under my soles proved I was awake. Switching on the light, I quickly scanned the room, but it didn't look as if anything had been thrown in. I raced over to the window. The drawn curtains had held back a large part of the debris, but piles of lethal-looking shards of glass on the floor meant that I didn't want to get much closer without proper shoes on. Leaning over, I pulled back the curtain. The early dawn light showed that the road was completely empty.

At that moment my dad burst through the door, closely followed by Mum. "Alex! What on earth was that? Are you OK?" He surveyed the damage as he spoke, and then carefully picked his way over to join me by the window. "Did you see anyone?" he asked, peering out in both directions.

I realised that my heart was racing, and had to take a deep breath before I could answer. "No. By the time I got there, whoever did it was gone."

"Now, let's not get all overdramatic," interrupted Mum, obviously trying to calm everything down. "It could have been a bird flying into the window. Don't assume that a person was responsible."

Dad and I exchanged a quick glance of perfect understanding. We both knew that what she had said was nonsense. Still shaking slightly, I looked through the window down to the ground below. "I can't see a bird from here. Maybe you should go and look. If there is one, it might need putting out of its misery."

"OK," Mum nodded and backed out of the room.

"Is there anything in here?" asked Dad as soon as she was out of earshot. "I mean, what was it? A brick?"

"I can't see anything," I said. "But there has to be something somewhere. Whatever it was that hit the glass was either very big or very fast; the window's completely disintegrated."

He grunted in agreement, taking another look down the road. "We need to get this cleared up," he said, giving me a quick hug. "I'll go and get my trainers on and I suggest you do the same. I'll be back in a second with the dustpan and a sack." Dad's voice changed as he went through the door. "Oh, hello. I didn't think you were actually alive at this time of day."

My brother tried to give him a withering look but at five in the morning he was too sleepy. "Thought maybe we were under attack. Coming to see if you needed help," he mumbled in my general direction as Dad disappeared.

"You play too many computer games. What were you planning to do – throw your console at them?"

"Ha ha. Very funny. What's happened then?"

"We don't know yet. My window's been broken, Mum thinks it was a bird strike, and Dad and I think someone threw something, but I can't see a stone or anything." I tried hard to keep my voice light, not show him how shaken I was.

"Oh, freaky." He looked mildly interested for a moment. "Jealous boyfriend? Irate mate? Anything like that?"

"Huh," I grunted, giving him my best scathing look. "Hardly. When did I last upset anyone?"

He considered the room again briefly. "There you go then. Maybe it *was* a bird." And it was true. I couldn't think of anyone who would do such a thing to me. Perhaps Mum was right.

"Well, if you don't need me I'll be nipping back to bed before Dad gets me up a ladder to fix that hole," he mumbled as he turned round and headed back towards his room.

I picked my way over to my desk and sat down to change my shoes. Despite the flip-flops, my right foot was already studded with tiny shards, one of which had drawn blood. I pulled a tissue from the box and wiped it clean. The wound was hardly more than a scratch, not worth getting a plaster for. I pressed the tissue against it until it stopped bleeding, and then fished around under the desk for my Converse. I was about to put them on when I realised that there was something in one of them, so I turned it upside down. A small, heavy, white ball dropped on to the carpet.

I looked at it for a second, then hesitantly reached down for it. The ball was covered in paper, which was secured by sticky tape. I carefully peeled back the corner of the tape and the paper unravelled. The golf ball inside dropped on to my desk while I turned over the crumpled sheet, holding my breath. I didn't recognise the handwriting on the sheet, but my blood ran cold as I read the words:

I know your secret, Alex.

My heart pounding, I shoved the piece of paper under my maths textbook as I heard Dad come back up the stairs. I had no idea what it was about, but I was pretty sure I didn't want to

involve my parents.

My day didn't improve much. The clearing up and waiting for the guy to come and board up the window meant that I was late for the school coach, but then that was late too, so I spent half an hour standing at the bus stop listening to the inane chatter of the junior kids. I longed to be able to drive myself to school, but that was a pretty distant dream; I was due to visit the police station that afternoon to answer to various driving offences, and fully expected to lose my provisional licence.

None of my friends was on the coach either, not even my best friend Grace, so when I finally got to school I walked over to the sixth form on my own. As I rounded the corner my way was blocked by a familiar figure. I began to smile but her face was stony. Without warning, she suddenly slapped me across the cheek. My head flew back with the force of it and a stinging feeling crept outwards from my cheekbone towards my ear.

I tried not to stagger backwards as I turned back to face her again, tears pricking at my eyes. The thin veneer of friendship between us had gone; she looked ready to kill me. She was standing facing me, balanced on the balls of her feet, preparing to swing again. As the ringing in my ears subsided I became conscious of the absence of other noises around us. In this corner of the school there was little activity; everyone else was already inside the building, and it wasn't yet time for the younger girls to be out on the pitches. No one was around to step in.

I could feel my cheek starting to redden. The stinging was slowly being replaced by a hot burning, and I could feel the welts rising where her long fingernails had scratched my skin.

"What on earth was that for?" I demanded, trying to stop my voice trembling.

"Don't play any of your stupid games with me!" she hissed. "I thought we were supposed to be friends."

It wasn't exactly the way I would have described our relationship, but this wasn't the time to disagree with her. "So did I, but friends don't usually go around hitting each other." I took a step towards her, rubbing my sore cheek. "Come on, tell me. What am I supposed to have done?"

"All right then, if you want me to spell it out. I want to know what you're doing with my boyfriend. Why is he so interested in you? You're nothing special."

A short snort of laughter escaped me before I could stop it. "What! I'm not doing anything with him, and I really can't imagine why you'd think I was."

"You're bound to say that, aren't you?" she spat, and there was real venom in her voice.

"What do you mean?"

"You two have got some secret little thing going on. I know it."

"That's such rubbish. What on earth gives you that idea?"

"Why else would he have a whole bunch of stuff on his computer about you?" Her voice was sneering now.

"About me? What sort of stuff?"

"I don't know. Lots of files."

"Why would he want files about me? What's in them?"

"I don't know yet, but I will, just as soon as I break the passwords. In the meantime you keep well away from him, do you understand me? Rob's mine!"

"Ashley, I know he is! And after all, it's you who's going to Cornwall with him, isn't it?" I gazed at her steadily.

"How do you know about Cornwall?" Her voice had turned

low and ominous. That had touched a nerve. I cursed myself silently and tried to think of a suitable response.

"Oh, you know, gossip in the common room. A few of the others were quite keen to share the news with me."

The thought that some of our friends saw her holiday with Rob as evidence that she'd beaten me in some competition between us obviously pleased her, and the look in her eyes reminded me of one I'd seen before, in a face that, thankfully, I would never see again; Ashley wore the same look of triumph that Catherine had worn weeks ago when she had me completely in her power in Kew Gardens. The memory chilled me so much that I took a step backwards and looked away. Ashley knew she had won.

She turned and started to walk away, but before she had gone more than a few paces she wheeled around and shouted, "You keep away from him, you hear me? You go anywhere near him and there'll be trouble!"

Curious eyes from some passing kids swivelled in my direction, but I kept mine firmly on Ashley as she walked away, still battling with my tears and a growing sense of injustice. I wondered briefly if she could have thrown that ball, but why would she then slap me? Two enemies before nine o'clock. Fear clutched at my stomach, and for a moment I seriously considered going home to hide in bed. The sharp pain in my cheek was turning to a dull ache, and I knew I should get something cold on it. With a groan I realised that I really had to sort it out quickly; my appointment with the police was in only a few hours, and I didn't want to look like I'd been in a fight. Cursing Ashley under my breath I made for the nearest toilet block.

* * *

The police officer looked over the top of her glasses at me, shook her head a little and returned to considering the papers in her hand.

"Well, Alexandra? What do you have to say for yourself?" she asked eventually.

I swallowed hard, wishing that there was a tumbler of water on my side of the desk. "I'm truly sorry for everything. I just can't remember any more. All I know is that I *had* to get to my friend Grace quickly. The rest is blank."

My eyes dipped to my lap, and I fiddled with the bracelet on my wrist. I couldn't hold her gaze any more, not when I was lying so comprehensively. "The doctor's report – does that help?" I added lamely.

Luckily my dad jumped in at that point. "We have provided all the relevant medical reports, Officer. You should have them there."

The police officer started turning over the sheets of paper in her file, pursing her thin lips as she started to read. It was getting uncomfortably warm in the featureless room in Twickenham Police Station that doubled as the Restorative Justice Centre. The open windows did little to help move the stale air around as the protective mesh stopped them opening more than a chink. I tried very hard not to fidget as she turned the last page, and kept my eyes down.

"Well, it's certainly very curious," she said, tapping the file with one long skinny finger, then picking up the medical report again.

"We've submitted a reference from Alex's headmistress," Dad added, pointing at a letter that could just be seen sticking out of the back of the file. "As you can see from that, Miss Harvey felt

that the most appropriate response to the incident was to strip Alex of her prefect's privileges."

I think I had been a prefect for the shortest time in the history of the school. They had added my name to the list for the following year when I was in a coma following the incident in Kew Gardens, then promptly stripped me of it when I regained consciousness and got hauled up for driving on my own with a provisional driving licence. I never even got to see a badge.

The policewoman, who had been looking as if she was going to tell Dad off for talking out of turn, fished the letter from the back of the file and scanned it.

"Keep calm; you're doing really well," said the soothing voice in my head. "Don't overdo the grovelling though."

I sighed in relief; Callum was back. It had been a long, stressful morning and I hadn't had a minute to call him to me, but he was finally here, making my wrist tingle as usual, as he moved his arm so that the identical bracelets we wore overlapped, his in his world, and mine in my own. I glanced up briefly at my reflection in the reinforced glass door and caught a glimpse of Callum's blindingly handsome face behind my shoulder. All my worries faded away as my love for him swamped every other emotion. He saw me looking and winked, then looked stern.

It had been a fortnight since I got out of hospital, and his voice in my head was a source of love and comfort, commentating on my world.

"Concentrate! Don't mess it up now!" He was right. The end was in sight. I looked briefly at the policewoman but made sure that my face didn't reflect my sudden contentment.

There was a knock and a young PC appeared nervously

at the door. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Inspector Kellie, but you wanted to know when that forensic report was in."

I looked quickly back at the policewoman; her stony exterior was now belied by the yellow light that was suddenly bouncing around above her head. I knew what it meant: she was either very happy about getting the report, or was very happy about seeing the fit-looking policeman. I hoped for her sake it was the policeman.

I was still astounded by the difference it made to me, to be able to tell when people were thinking happy or miserable thoughts. It seemed to be an unexpected side effect of the miraculous recovery I had made from my vegetative coma. Only two of us knew what had really happened to me: me and Callum, whose mysterious reflection only I could see.

Callum was waiting patiently, as he always did. I tried hard to not look at him in the shiny surface of the glass and instead concentrate on the police officer as he advised. But it was so hard to ignore him. My love for him felt so profound, and I knew, given what he'd risked for me, that he loved me too. Knowing that we were separated by – I swallowed and forced myself to remember – the fact that he had drowned, made no difference to the intensity of my feeling for him. Ever since we'd seen one another under the dome of St Paul's Cathedral I had loved him completely. I shook myself mentally, then refocused on Inspector Kellie; as I watched closely I could see a slight softening of her gaze as she looked at the young policeman. "Thank you, Constable," she said formally. "I'll be with you shortly and you can take me through the main points."

I looked swiftly at the PC; he too had a bouncing yellow flicker just above his head. I wondered if the two of them would ever admit anything to the other. Whatever happened next

though, it was enough for me that the inspector was in a good mood; maybe I was going to get away with it.

She looked back at me, and pushed the file away.

"Well, Alexandra, I see that you have clearly already been punished by your school. And I think that, under the circumstances," and she waved her hand at the medical report, "there is little to be gained by prosecuting you for these offences."

I felt my heart lift at her words but tried to continue to look contrite.

"However," she continued, and my heart sank again, "I shall have to issue you with a formal reprimand. You have expressed regret, and as your driving didn't cause any accidents we won't take it any further. We will keep the reprimand on file though, and if there is any repeat offence, there will be no leniency shown."

Dad wasn't quite so happy when we finally got outside. "I have no idea what a reprimand will do to the insurance policy," he grumbled. "It may be best for you to give up driving for a while until the dust settles."

"I'm sure I'll manage, Dad." I grinned at him briefly, unable to contain my joy. "I'll enjoy having you both ferry me around, especially once Josh is off in the autumn."

He groaned again as he realised I was right. If he didn't insure me to finish my lessons he was definitely going to get stuck with a lot more driving as soon as my brother Josh went off to university. He was in a no-win situation and he knew it, so I was surprised when he suddenly smiled back.

"I'll talk to the insurers today," he said, "and get an update on the increase. Then you can give me a cheque for the difference."

I had no quick answer to that. He had won after all. He knew that I had quite a lot of money saved up to buy my own car

when the time came, as I had been putting away all the babysitting money I made. I felt my arm tingle and could hear Callum chuckle as he caught up with the last part of the conversation.

"He's right, you know. It's your own fault you're in all this trouble. If you hadn't believed Catherine's lies about me in the first place, none of this would have happened."

I made a non-committal noise that would convey my feelings to Callum without alarming Dad. As we got into the car I considered the changes in my life. Less than a month ago I had been a perfectly happy, normal teenager, out celebrating the end of my exams. Now I was lying to the police and finding every opportunity I could to be alone with a strange and gorgeous apparition who was summoned by a bracelet I'd found in the Thames. I glanced down at the amulet on my wrist, its fiery stone glinting in the light, and felt overwhelmingly grateful to have found it and discovered its extraordinary power.

I settled back into the passenger seat and couldn't help smiling as I thought of him. He was tall, dark blond and extremely athletic. I could see him beside me in the mirror or in other reflective surfaces, and hear him when the amulets on our wrists were in the same space, but most of the time I could only feel the faintest of touches as he sat behind my shoulder when we talked. He was a Dirge, a soul caught in a terrible half-life of misery after falling into the River Fleet and drowning. These days the Fleet was mostly covered over, and very few Londoners even realised it was there, but centuries before it had been a busy river running from Hampstead in north London, and something about its water, still flowing into the Thames, had a mysterious power to transform those who drowned in it, though none of the Dirges understood what it was. All they knew was that day after day they were

compelled to feed on the happy thoughts and memories that they stole from unsuspecting people and stored in the amulets they all wore. And every night another fierce compulsion drove them back to St Paul's Cathedral, the place they now called home.

They knew of only one way to end their misery, but it carried a huge price for the living human who trusted them. Callum's sister Catherine had made me believe that he didn't really love me. In my despair, she had very nearly succeeded in tricking me into sacrificing myself. She had sucked away every memory I had ever had and left me for dead. I was only alive because Callum had been prepared to risk himself to save me, emptying his own amulet of stolen happiness so he could capture a copy of all my memories as Catherine spooled them out of me. And after she had finally escaped their life of purgatory in an explosion of sparks and died, he gave them back to me, leaving himself with nothing. Every time I thought about it, I felt breathless with love and gratitude. Most of the time, at least around me, he seemed to be able to tolerate the desperate wretchedness that he must be feeling without a good store of the thing that was so essential to him. And he wouldn't tell me what he was having to resort to in order to refill his amulet. I didn't want to ask. Whatever he was doing, though, he was as loving towards me as he had been when we had first met.

There was no one else in when we got back to the house, so I didn't have to spend hours telling Mum all about the police caution. As soon as I could, I ran up to my bedroom to see if he was already there. The bedroom was gloomy from the boarded-up window, but as I slipped on to the chair by my desk, the tingle was back in my arm and a sense of peaceful contentment washed through me.