

## Crossroad

Hazel stared out of the car's window, but not beyond the refracted image of her face. Running a hand down the worn, leather handle, she placed a finger on the lock, flicking it back and forth.

*Flick, flick.*

*'It's already been 17 years...17 whole years and 5 months in this place,'* she thought. She sighed inwardly, trying to ignore the accumulative pressure of her luggage and bags pressing against her shoulder. The seat groaned underneath their weight (*or maybe mine*, Hazel thought dryly), its over-used springs squeaking a little with every little jerk or jolt the car made.

*Flick, flick-flick.*

The car finally made a left turn out of their neighbourhood, and as it did, her bags squashed the breath out of her, causing her to utter a small 'oof'.

"Sorry 'bout that, Haze. But hey – maybe it'll make you thinner, you know, like squashing a bug or tenderizing a slab of steak." Her dad's joke broke her silent reverie, and she caught the smile he threw in the rear mirror. She cracked one herself, albeit a little half-hearted.

"So, I'll either end up dead or as dead meat? Not much choice there..." This time, both her parents chuckled.

"Just ignore your father, Hazel. He's just miffed because he has to sacrifice his Sunday afternoon, just for you," her mother said, acting as the peacemaker as always.

"And the big soccer game – it's Chelsea against Arsenal!" her father protested. "You know how I love a good rivalry - their last game ended as two-two, and I'd love to see Wenger and Mourinho go at each other again. Who'd win the 'whose face resembles a flaming beetroot the most' this time, I wonder?" Hazel's mother chided him again, carrying the conversation to another everyday playful banter. Hazel allowed her mind to tune out their conversation, her finger unconsciously dancing on the lock once again.

*Flick.*

*'It's a new world out there,'* she decided. *'Well, maybe not new, but...different at any rate.'* She gazed at her ghostly reflection in the glass, her eyes sweeping over the oh-so-familiar, yet ever changing face of hers. The shock of red hair always, always caught the eyes first. She'd gotten them dyed when she was 13 – she had followed her mother to the barber's and decided that if her mother could dye it for the first time, then she could too. Her mother was thrown into fits when she saw her 'baby' defying her own name, as Hazel's hair was actually the inspiration behind it. Hazel tugged at a loose curl, sharing a secret smile with the 13-year-old Hazel of her memory. She could still hear the ringing of her mother's faked, anguished wails wafting through her memories, feel her first glorious trumpet of rebellion...but she couldn't quite recall what she or her mother looked like before they'd both begun dying their hair. She shrugged inwardly, cherishing the memory before surfacing back into the present.

*Flick, flick, flick.*

Next to be noticed were the slightly sticking-out ears that many friends and family often linked back to her mother, though tentatively now as said ears of hers were pierced with – how many? – 7 different earrings altogether; four on the left, three on the right. She had chickened out on the last one on the right that would have given her an even number of piercings, as the fresh pain of the one she'd gotten on the top part of her left was still racing through her nerves. Who was it – Eve? no, Rina, who had gone with her, had scoffed a little at her cowardice before sitting down for her 11<sup>th</sup> piercing. But later on, she had smiled, slapped Hazel on the back affectionately and congratulated her on finding a cheap store to get it done, and for choosing a cool earring. Hazel fingered it now, remembering how tender and sore it used to feel. Now, all she could feel was nostalgia...she blinked twice, forcing her mind to the present.

*Flick-flick, flick-flick-flick.*

She focused her mind on the task once more, trying to push unwanted thoughts to the back of her mind. Her eyes landed on her phantom nose and mouth, and she twisted them a bit – the right corner of her mouth winking upwards, the left corner frowning downwards, and flaring her nostrils until – “*I can see all your nose-hairs!*”, her ghost-mind whispered, and she choked back the same hysterical laugh of her 5-year-old self. Instead, she settled on grinning wildly, breaking her ‘Hazel-face’ as her father aptly called it. She lifted a finger to poke at the corners of her mouth, trying to straighten out the grin before her father saw and inquired about her sanity.

*Silence.*

The stream of laughter died down slowly in her mind, as her eyes finally met the one thing (or rather, two things) it looks at, yet overlooks the most – themselves. They were the other source of inspiration for her name. At least, that was what her parents said. Her eyes had apparently undergone a pigment change and became a few shades darker to a milk-chocolate-brown rather than staying a hazel-brown, so even her eyes had decided to be rebellious. She stared and stared, remembering all the baby pictures of her that her mother showed her a few weeks ago. It was...surreal and bizarre to think that the baby in the picture would become her. The blank, far-away look in their eyes was probably the only similarity left, if she could call it one. Even her own body didn't seem to want to remind her of who she was anymore. She stared some more, hoping, searching for something that would tell her that *this was who she is*, that she did not have to be afraid because she would be the same person deep down inside, even after being exposed to the world on her own, after touching the world and presenting herself to it...

...In the throes of her heart, where she kept it screaming to itself, she knew that it was impossible.

*Flick. Flick.*

Ripping her eyes off her apparition, she tried to shut out the agonizing screams that were becoming increasingly difficult to repress. She thought she would drown, but thankfully, her mother saved her from that.

“Why are you suddenly so quiet, Haze? Did dad really offend you that much?” She said this jokingly, but Hazel could never tell when her mother was truly being serious or just playing around. Judging by the glare her mother was sending to her unsuspecting father, she voted for the former.

“No, mum. I was just thinking to myself.” She smiled, at least, that was what she thought she did.

*Smile for the birdie.*

Her mother caught her smile, and went back to lecturing her father on how much time he spends on watching soccer rather than taking her out. Hazel blinked, glad to avoid...avoid something, she didn't know what. But it definitely wasn't something she'd want.

Turning her head towards the window again, she ignored the small, forlorn look of her mirage-self and concentrated on the scenery that was speeding past. She recognised the same countryside and signposts they would always pass on their way to the airport, the same mountain shapes and sloping valleys, lush grass contrasting to the rusting signs. Before, she would dismiss them in a plethora of happy thoughts of going on holiday and having the opportunity to see the world from a different window. This time, she tried to grasp them with the tendrils of her mind, engraving them, piercing them, burning them into every nook and cranny of her memory so that she won't forget everything now that embodied her origins. She cannot, will *not*, forget – no, she will remember them like she had done with her other memories, just like...just like her other memories...really, honestly, staying as close to truth and life as possible, maybe not like her other memories now...not fuzzy like *they* were, because *she had to remember this time*, not like those other times...

*Flick.*

She exhaled unconsciously, her breath fogging up her view. Feeling a sudden surge of childish behaviour, she placed a solitary finger against the glass, drawing a circle, two dots, and then an ironic curved line.

*Flick-flick, flick.*

‘*I can't do this.*’ A small voice murmured to her heart-strings, and she let her finger drag downwards from the corner of the curved line to the softness of her lap. She swallowed, watching the world outside pass through the lines she drew through the fog and catching a sign that said ‘Exit – Route 495’. Then, clasping her hands together, she let them console one another in their fit of uneasiness and uncertainty.

Hazel stayed that way for quite some time before her father's voice jerked through her body.

“Hey, we're almost there Haze! Aren't you excited?” Deep, deep down in her heart, Hazel knew that her father meant well, but at that over-used phrase, that latter, infuriating yet so appropriate phrase made her want to grind her teeth in frustration and a little sorrow. She opted to remain silent, not trusting herself to speak.

“Haze? You there? Knock-knock, this is no time to stare off into space you know.” Her mother chuckled the same way she always did after she made a bad joke (and knew it).

The laugh lingered in the air for quite some time as her mother waited for an answer.

*Flick, flick.*

A sigh.

“I’m not staring off into space, ok? I do have better things to do and do them, you know.” Hazel tried not to be harsh; she tried to forget all the normal conversations they had up to this point, how they had treated her leaving as something simple and something that doesn’t deserve any change of pace or anything really –

“Oh don’t be so stiff, Hazel. I was just teasing, you know. So, have you decided what to get?”

Hazel frowned, slightly confused.

“What? Get what?” A giggle-sigh followed.

“See? You *were* staring off into space! Didn’t you hear any of the conversation I had between your father and I?”

Hazel shook her head mutely before remembering that her parents were in the front seats, so opened her mouth and said *no, not really*.

“Well, we decided to get you a leaving present! And you can choose it yourself – anything you want, but it has to be below a hundred, including tax. And don’t worry; we know how indecisive you are so we’re going to give you all the time you want to decide what you want before – ohhh look! We’re here!” Her mother broke off, clearly too excited at the prospect of shopping in the duty free stores at the airport.

*Flick, flick, flick.*

Oh, but she knew what she wanted. At that point, squashed between the car door that was keeping her in and her luggage that was pushing her out to the point where she couldn’t feel it anymore, she knew exactly what she really wanted.

*I want to remember, and be remembered.*

Opening her mouth once more to speak, she softly said,

“*Yes, I’m here.*”

*[Flick. Ka-cha.]*