

# You Could Be Me

*by* Foster Trecost

Morning would arrive, but her first signs were hidden in darkness. Streetlights hummed a faint glow, but not nearly enough to counter the well-lit café, allowing Josh to see nothing through the front window past his own reflection. It glared at him with a relentless gaze as if from an oversized television. Not to watch was the simple solution, but Josh felt compelled to meet the stare, much like someone witnessing unthinkable tortures, powerless to turn away. He longed for daybreak, for the earth's rotation to flood the streets with sunlight, but nothing moved fast enough, not even the planet. So he squinted and squirmed, even adjusted his angle, all to no avail. He was forced to watch the man watching him.

The café was empty, but at that hour they were all empty. A jazz set dripped from an overhead speaker, but wasted on Josh; he was aware of the music just as he was aware of the moon, but would have failed to notice if either disappeared. Also present was a steady drone emanating from a nearby light fixture. This he could hear clearly to the point he could not hear it at all, the sound so entwined with the absence of sound that the two became the same. To Josh, the café was silent, but this did nothing to aid his concentration, which had eroded to resemble a smooth plane with no known points of friction, allowing him to focus on nothing, not even the letter.

An elderly couple positioned themselves almost as close to Josh as to each other, huddling over their coffees like campfires. They sat in silence, thinking the same thing, and very aware they were, yet completely unaware they shared the thought with the stranger next to them. In unknown mental unison, all three deliberated the same notion.

Without consulting his watch, Josh knew only a few minutes had passed since he last looked at the window; still, he looked again. There was a slight tremor in his hand, not enough to be noticed by anyone, but enough for him wonder if it was from the coffee, or perhaps the letter. He was unsure. He took another sip

and sat his cup on the table. He pushed back in the oversized chair, giving a much-needed stretch. He had not slept and a rigid quality reserved for the dead poured over his body. He resumed a posture conducive to writing, but looked again at his reflection.

And this time something was different.

Josh, not one to imagine things, thought maybe he had. It was him, it looked like him, but something seemed different. He raked his reflection, so absorbed with the joke his eyes were playing that he failed to swallow his last sip of coffee, but wished he had because every drop spewed with the force of a fire hose. Josh looked at the window in shock. He had only seconds before placed his coffee cup on the table; his reflection, however, had not.

He squeezed his eyes, hoping to erase the illusion. He looked again and found what he expected to find, which was his reflection just as it should be. Coffee cup on the table, right where he put it. Josh exhaled and even smiled. His reflection did the same.

"You okay?"

The question came from the elderly man and went unanswered because Josh was unsure how to answer. Certainly not with the truth: My reflection has a life of its own. The absurdity of this thought came to focus as he allowed it to live, and the same absurdity caused it to die. He attempted a return to the letter, but the thought was not dead yet, and he went back to his reflection. After seeing nothing unusual he moved to turn away, but stopped when he saw something impossible. His reflection, it did something, something he had not done. There was movement, and the movement was unmistakable: it waved.

Josh knew his eyes to be wide and full with panic, but the eyes in the window were composed, peaceful. Then they winked. Josh shot a quick glance to his hand. It was not waving, had not waved, nor was it in position to wave, and he had not winked, either. Then reflection spoke. "It's just me. The same reflection you've been looking at your whole life."

Josh cast an evil stare upon the elderly couple. "Excuse me?"

He turned back to the window and saw nothing but his reflection. "I'm going crazy," he thought. He fisted both eyes, then with one hand grabbed his pen, the notepad with the other. He moved each up and down, commanding his reflection to do the same. It obeyed. "I'm going crazy," he thought.

He forced his attention to the small table at his knees. A plate containing the remnants of a muffin and a paperback book had been carefully arranged atop a newspaper placemat. The book served no purpose. Josh had tried to read it before and knew the number of failed attempts would increase by one if opened, so it remained shut. The last thing he needed was another failure. Instead he looked at the notepad. He admired the thin blue lines, neatly stacked, evenly spaced, and the red line down the left side. He thought the scribbled words were misplaced, hardly deserving to appear on such an orderly piece of paper. He began writing when he first arrived, his body not yet warmed from his own coffee campfire, and shaking more than anything contributed to his messy scrawl, but more than cold contributed to his shaking.

Many years passed since he had written a letter, not since summer camp. He hated camp and wrote his parents to tell them they were the only thing he hated more. That letter hurt them. They would again be the recipients, but this letter would hurt more. He wrote and continued writing until he heard another voice.

"Writing a letter?" asked the elderly man. "People don't write letters anymore. I used to get them from my grandson. Now he sends that electric mail with computers. I've got no use for a computer, so I don't get any mail." His wife detected a profound sadness and placed a hand atop his, saying everything that needed to be said, none of it audible. "So it's just me and Mildred," he said, nodding in her direction. "All alone in this big city. Kids moved away, friends moved on." He paused, his eyes struggling to keep pace with the words, "Now we're just waiting our turn." He leaned closer and lowered his voice to a coarse whisper that sounded like the words were being pulled across sandpaper. "Millie here, she thinks she'll be first, but I disagree. She's a tough bird, she'll outlive us all."

Josh lacked the skills to handle this conversation, so he responded with a grin that, if accurate, conveyed something between aggravation and nausea. He returned to the notepad and considered ripping the sheet from its binding, but starting over was not so simple. He had tried. He had failed. So he continued to write.

"Keep writing those letters," the old man said. He helped his wife to her feet. "There's something about mail. Makes me feel like somebody cares."

His wife, who had yet to speak, said, "They look about the same age." Her husband agreed. Josh felt a rush of cold air when the door closed.

More customers had come in, but Josh sat alone in the front corner, or at least he hoped he was alone. He looked at the window and his reflection looked back.

Then it spoke: "What'd you think?"

Josh questioned what was more insane: to hear voices, or to see who said them. Then it spoke again. "That old couple, what'd you think?"

Before Josh could respond, he contemplated a third level of insanity, which occurred after the voices were heard. The third level occurred when the voices were answered. "They're sad," he said, moving to level three. "They're all alone." He paused to think about what he was doing: "I'm talking to a piece of glass."

"I'm not just a piece of glass," said the reflection. "I'm you."

"You can read my thoughts?" asked Josh, but not out loud.

"Of course I can, they're my thoughts, too. Don't be selfish. If you don't want me to know them, then don't think them."

Josh stared at the window and thought about what the reflection had said, or what he had said, unsure of which.

"Don't spend too much time on it," said the reflection. "I'm you, you're me."

"What do you want?" asked Josh.

"I want the same things you want because we're the same person."

Josh was about to continue with his thoughts on the elderly couple when the reflection became nothing more than a reflection.

"I am nine and my brother is five."

He turned to see who had interrupted. "Excuse me?" he asked.

The young girl repeated herself in a haughty strain that far outweighed his own haughty strain. "I said I am nine," said the girl, "and my brother is five. But he is sick. To whom are you writing?"

Instead of answering, Josh asked: "What's he got?"

"I'm not sure," she said, "but he's going to die." The somberness Josh expected to accompany such a disclosure had been replaced with indifference. She continued: "In fact, he may have died already, but I can't be certain. It's quite sad, really. We were supposed to grow up together."

Josh searched for the girl's guardian, but no one stood out as a likely companion. "Where are your parents?" he asked.

"Where are *your* parents?" she asked back.

Josh smiled and said, "It's early for a young girl to be alone in a coffee shop."

"I don't drink coffee," she defended. "My mother is at the hospital. Mrs. Wilson is picking me up to take me. Mrs. Wilson is my mother's friend, and mine, too."

A quick study of the young girl yielded a baffling incongruence. Her clothes were worn to holes in the expected places; her hair unkempt. Yet she spoke an upper-class English. Josh theorized hardship had besieged her once-affluent family, and all that remained was the way she talked.

"What about your father?" he pressed. "Why can't he pick you up?"

"He's not here," she said. "I asked you a question," she added, and asked it again, thrusting her finger in the direction of his notepad, "To whom are you writing?"

"My parents."

"I sometimes write letters to my father," she said, returning to a subject Josh thought closed. "But he doesn't read them."

"How do you know?"

"Because," she said, "dead people can't read letters."

Josh straddled the urge and the inability to speak. Her voice held fast to the calculation he had come to expect; it was Josh who appeared disturbed by what she said.

"It happened last year."

He wanted to ask what happened, but a horn sounded from outside. "Mrs. Wilson is here, I must go." She extended her hand. "It was very nice talking with you," she said, and clanged her way out the door. Josh again felt the rush of cold air when the door closed.

Through the window he watched her climb into the backseat of Mrs. Wilson's car. She waved as they pulled away, but he was unable to return it. Alone again, he read what he had written and scolded himself, wishing he had waved back.

And with her departure, the reflection returned: "What do you think happened to her father?"

Josh did not answer.

"Don't be naïve," said the reflection. "You know what happened."

Josh shook his head. "Leave me alone."

"Not until you understand."

"How do you know I don't?"

"Because I'm you. Think about," and the reflection paused, appearing to struggle with the words. "Think about...what you're doing." He could only speak with great effort. "Josh." It was the last word the reflection would say. Something was wrong. Something was different. Then something caught Josh's eye and he understood. Morning had arrived.

Josh turned to his reflection, which he could barely see. "Your time's up," he said. "Nice talking to you, but it's time for you to go."

The reflection tried to speak once more. He opened his mouth, but stopped short of saying anything. He flashed a grin of surrender, then faded away.

"Good riddance," said Josh. He looked out the window. Cars parked along the curb took much of his view, but not all. A gap between the two in front allowed him to see clear across the street. Sitting there, occupying the same section of glass once housed by his reflection, was a homeless man. He sat on a piece of cardboard, asking for neither for money nor food, and wore a once-white tee shirt with thick words across the front: YOU COULD BE ME

Josh finished writing, signed the letter, and sealed it in an envelope. The decision to mail acted as an insurance policy. He could have left the letter behind, but he needed a guarantee. He needed to be certain he would follow through. Once mailed, he would have no choice. Across the street sat a mailbox. He waited at the corner for cars to pass and looked at the buildings around him. He wondered if his morning acquaintances lived nearby. Then he wondered if they lived at all.

The mailbox looked like it was smiling, so Josh smiled back. He opened the mouth with one hand, the letter clutched in the other, and the smile turned to all out laughter. The world seemed to pause; no movement, no sound. The city, whose heart had just begun to beat, was not beating at all. He lost himself, seeing things impossible to be seen. The elderly couple walked by: "Keep writing those letters." Then a car approached with young girl in the back seat. She waved as it passed.

Josh recalled the things his reflection had said, or that he had said, still unsure which. Then someone pressed PLAY and the world began to turn. There were sounds all around. Car horns. People talking. "Drop it in," Josh shouted. "Do it. Do it now."

He relaxed his grip, the letter now dangling between two fingers. His watch said seven forty-five. Breakfast time. He loosened his fingers and let the letter fall, watching it drop out of sight, but not into the mailbox. Rather, in the garbage can beside it. He looked across the street. Through the window he could see the empty chair

that had been his. He smiled a wry half-smile, then turned to the homeless man. "You hungry?" asked Josh. "I'm hungry. Let's get something to eat."

