

Da Vinci's Lady: Part 1

She had always been a mirror, I realized. Identical until it was broken.

When Nate announced that he had a serious girlfriend, mom had insisted that he bring her home for Christmas. When he said she was coming, my mom pulled out all the stops: food, decorations, the whole welcome wagon. My mom had us dust off the two illuminated reindeer in the basement and the house smelled of her cinnamon babka that she only baked on special occasions. Honestly, I think I was the most excited to see this girl. From what I had heard, she was perfect for Nate. And if she was perfect for Nate, she had to be something special.

It wasn't like my brother Nate was unpopular with girls at any point in his life. In fact, he often regaled me with his stories of women he met on his campus and had to force away. He was the more popular of the two of us with more natural charisma than I knew was possible. We shared the same dirty blonde hair and slightly crooked smile, though I was thin and bony by comparison. Nate was a football star in both high school and college, as good-looking as he was athletic. As everyone had said in high school, Nate 'broke records on the field and broke hearts off it.' Two girls in my grade had actually gotten into a fight over him. It was still referred to as 'The Brawl in D Hall', even after Nate graduated.

Christmas celebrations arrived, and my parents were on pins and needles. After my grandparents showed up, my two cousins came with their parents. We all spoke in hushed tones about this mysterious new influence that could, as my aunt Linda put it, 'make an honest man out of Nate.' When we saw his car pull up, the whole family made

a move for one of the front windows to catch a glance. My mom honestly gasped as the mystery girl climbed out of Nate's passenger side.

After the usual interlude of conversation, Nate finally brought the girl forward.
"Everybody, this is Natalie."

Natalie exceeded expectations, I had to give Nate that. She was blonde, though Natalie's hair was a curtain of curled bronze as opposed to the platinum or gold he usually preferred. From the moment she walked in, her bright green eyes disarmed my family's normally scrutinizing gaze. She charmed everyone in the room with a smile and a flash of her eyes. Natalie was a dance captain for the school and had seen Nate playing. As a first year starter, how could she resist his usual charms? Almost as impressive was that Nate was still with her since the end of football season.

Nate stayed downstairs with Natalie, while she partook in the "tradition" where the family questioned her until they found out everything that they wanted to know about any of Nate's girlfriends. Honestly, it was just an excuse for my aunts and grandmother to be unrestricted in how nosey they were.

"You're studying math? What do you plan on doing with that?"

"How often do you attend church?"

"How long were your parents dating before they married?"

To escape the embarrassing barrage, my cousin Dale and I went upstairs. His sister Kate, equally uncomfortable, followed us. The three of us settled into my room, occasionally hearing laughter through the metal vents that connected the house. Kate

settled into a corner away from us, returning her attention to her book. I wasn't surprised. We had only invited my sulking, brooding cousin Kate to be nice.

"She's something else, huh?" I asked my cousin Dale. It was more of a statement than a question, the answer already provided by my eager eyes.

My cousin Dale nodded with a huge smile on his face. "She's the kind of girl you dream about, you know?" I was glad I wasn't the only one who thought she was beyond perfect. Dale and I went back and forth for a few minutes going over her looks and grinning like mad fools the whole time. It wasn't for about ten minutes that my cousin Kate finally spoke up.

"Yeah, I don't know..." Kate shrugged, not looking up from her book, a massive tome of Western philosophy. "There's something a little too...Da Vinci about it, you know?" I wasn't surprised Kate had something to say to about this. She always liked spoiling the fun when Dale and I got excited about anything, from girls to football. We thought she would be happy about having another girl close to her age in the family. Honestly, I don't think she was even reading. Just trying to look more adult than everyone else and taking every opportunity to roll her eyes. She was really into experimental art, while I could barely spell 'existentialism'.

"What do you mean by 'Da Vinci' about it?" I asked.

"Well, there's this conspiracy theory," Kate began, switching into professor mode. "That Mona Lisa was a man or a self-portrait. Either his younger self or a feminine version of his own face."

"I'm struggling with your overly complicated metaphor." I was certain Kate was just trying to sound more intelligent than me. If I just let her know she won, maybe she'd stop.

"Don't tell me you didn't notice," Kate said. "They look like they could be twins!"

"Twins?" Dale asked his sister. "Really?"

"You're joking, right?" Kate sighed, pointing at me. "Just put a wig on his brother and you won't see a difference."

"No way," I said. That didn't add up in my mind. I'd known Nate for too long to see him resembling a girl in any way.

"Okay, fine..." Kate picked up my laptop and opened up to Facebook. She pulled up Nate's profile and found a picture of him and Natalie together. She turned the computer around and showed me.

"Same color eyes," Kate began, "same color hair, same cheekbones, same nose...tell me that you at least see *one* of those things."

I looked at the picture. Sure, they were both blondes. Maybe their noses were similar...and maybe their eyes were really alike in color...and maybe—

"Oh God," I said, astonished. I wasn't sure not really sure if that was the right response. I already felt guilty about being attracted to my brother's girlfriend. Now I was finding out I was attracted to my brother's face. I could hear Freud laughing from his grave.

"So, the boy finally gets it!" Kate laughed. "I wonder if they're related or something."

"How did I miss that?" I asked. "More importantly, how did you notice?" Now that I was aware of it, I couldn't stop looking at the picture.

"Guys!" My aunt Linda called. "Dinner!"

I squirmed at the prospect of sitting across from my brother and his new twin. I didn't feel too hungry.

Da Vinci's Lady: Part 2

The meal was, in as few words as needed, awkward. Across the ham and green beans, I couldn't stop staring at Natalie, but it wasn't the same kind of staring as before. Now, every time I looked at her face, I saw my brother staring back at me. I officially hated Kate more than ever. I watched them and noticed it wasn't just their faces that were similar, but they acted alike and talked the same way. When Nate would be mentioning something to my uncle about the football games, Natalie was facing the other direction and talking to my mother about her time on the dance team. Nate would be telling Dad about a class giving him trouble and Natalie would be talking to Kate about studying with Nate all night for a test in that class. It was like they more than looked alike, but thought the same things.

Afterward, we all sat around the living room or milled around the kitchen, talking and drinking coffee. I was sitting alone in the living room, collecting my thoughts, when the last person I wanted to talk to that night sauntered over to me.

"Do you mind if I sit here for a bit?" Natalie asked. I didn't say no. In fact, I don't remember saying anything. I just awkwardly signaled for her to join me on the couch.

"I don't think we've officially met," Natalie said with a smile. "You're Nate's little brother, right?"

"Only by three years," I rushed. I didn't inherit the same charm that Nate seemed to have.

"Well," Natalie said, "he always talks about you."

"He talked about you whenever he came home. There wasn't much for us to go on, but he got everyone pretty excited to meet you."

"I hope I haven't disappointed you, then. I haven't, have I?" I looked her in the eyes. She smiled and I felt my hairs rising and goose bumps popping all over my arms. I wasn't sure how to answer. She had lived up to Nate's standards, but Kate's observation had set everything in a different light. I wanted to tell her why she unnerved me. I licked my lips and finally answered her question.

"No," I lied. "I can see why he likes you so much."

"Well, it looks like Nate wants me to talk to your aunt again," Natalie sighed, "We'll be seeing plenty of each other though, don't worry."

I nodded and smiled. I couldn't help but let out a small breath. I saw Natalie walk over to Nate and slip her arm around his back. They smiled and I couldn't help but feel an eerie chill. I told myself, after a while, it didn't matter what I thought. Nate was happy and it didn't matter what I thought of her in the end. It was Nate's life.

The whole time that Nate and Natalie were with us, they stayed in his old room, right next door to mine. I had these weird recurring dreams, where I would be looking in a mirror and looking back at me was Natalie, or sometimes a girl version of me would be looking back. I'd say they were nightmares, but they were never really that terrifying. Just unsettling.

As soon as Nate left, things were actually pretty normal for me again. Without her in the house, I was able to put Natalie out of my mind and get out of those dreams. Nate

kept talking about what they were doing together. It was like they never left each other's side. Which was why it was such a miracle he wasn't in the car that night.

Da Vinci's Lady: Part 3

About a month after the Da Vinci fiasco, Natalie had gone to the store while Nate was in class. There had been some kind of accident, but Nate didn't like explaining it. I never heard what had happened completely. I only ever heard bits and pieces: the car, a truck, gas and a spark that had changed pretty much everything for the two of them.

It was like something out of a Greek tragedy. Natalie's body wasn't hurt, but the burns had gotten pretty bad on her skin. Her whole face had been wrapped up in gauze for days. Natalie's parents had opted to take her out of school, but things were still up in the air with her and Nate for a while.

Even after the doctor's told her it would be safe to take it off, she left the bandages on. It was weeks before Nate got to see her without them. He had gone to visit her and talk with her but found things were especially tense. I saw pictures of him sitting next to her trying to look happy while she was still in recovery. He occasionally came home with cuts or bruises from when she'd throw things during a bad day. Nate told me about this every weekend he came home, which suddenly increased in frequency.

"She's getting to me, man," He told me once when we were sitting in front of the TV together.

"Why is she so angry anyways?"

"Trauma can do that to a person," Nate said. "She just doesn't know how to deal with people like this. She hates getting sympathy, but people won't really talk to her otherwise. I know she won't mean to, but...you can't take some things back."

"Then why keep dating her?" I asked. "It's obvious that things aren't working out, right?"

"It's not so simple. I wish it were, but it's not. I mean, think about it. I dump her after her accident when our relationship, on the surface, is exactly the same to everyone else. As far as their concerned, I'd be dumping only because of her accident. Anyone I tried dating after that would just remind me that I dumped a girl with a messed up face. Besides, I'd never find another girl like her...there's something about her you know?"

"Yeah," I sighed. "Something..."

"But every time I look at her now and try to remember who we were, I only see the accident. I barely remember who she used to be. I get chills."

I nodded. There wasn't really an appropriate response.

It got to a point where he might as well have just stopped dating her, but he insisted they were still together. I started to worry, but then I remembered this was Nate. He was bound to bounce back any day now. Something would happen and he would get that brilliant idea to get things back to the way they used to be.

Nate never bounced back, even when Natalie started to get better. I saw them together on Facebook. She'd gotten some skin grafts, but it didn't look very good, initially. She had kept the bandages on for a while longer than people thought she would.

Nate's grades started to go. He seemed less interested in football. When he wasn't at home, the only person he seemed to be around was Natalie. At times, it was

like all they had was each other. I remember talking with Kate while I was still waiting for Nate's big comeback. Inevitably, the conversation shifted back to Nate.

"He'll come back around, you'll see," I told her. "He'll be his old self again soon, don't worry."

Kate shook her head. "I don't think so."

"You don't know that." Nate was going to be all right. If he wasn't, what hope was there for anyone else?

Nate started coming home more frequently. Weekends, pointless observances and any opportunity that he would be able to drive down and back was suddenly a chance for Nate to escape from Natalie's anger. Nate told me about what Natalie was like these days.

"She was angrier than she used to be," he explained. "One minute, we're having a normal conversation and almost connecting again, and the next she's screaming for me to get out of the room."

She would throw things and yell at him for things that seemed inconsequential. He had put a soda can on the floor once and forgotten it was there. She had walked by, knocked the can over and lost her temper, throwing the can across the room and hitting his head. He had tried to explain that he was sorry, but she didn't stop throwing cups, magazines or books at him. It was around this time that I realized how bad things were for Nate.

Da Vinci's Lady: Part 4

Natalie ended up going back to school after the summer. Her face had healed up for the most part and if you hadn't known, it would have looked halfway to normal. You might have felt something was off if it was the first time seeing her, but you weren't really sure what was wrong. She still wasn't smiling as much, but at the same time, neither was Nate. Her scars were still very visible if you know what she looked like before, and Nate still thought that he was trapped.

Natalie had stopped dance team but still came to every one of Nate's games. I had gone to one of the games and sat next to Natalie. She was quiet and when she did speak, it was a hoarse whisper.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" She whispered, trying to start a conversation. She was wearing oversized sunglasses that took up most of her face. Her hair was much shorter than when I last saw her, but it had grown back to a simpler bob. I was a little surprised that she started the conversation.

"Yeah," I answered. "Not since last winter, right?"

"Right," Natalie said. She was quiet again.

"Nate says you took some time off?"

"You don't have to act like you don't know," Natalie said, grimly pulling down the glasses. I could see the outlines of scars around her eyes. Her left eye had been affected by the accident, dulled to a cloudy grey that Nate had said was hypersensitive to light. The skin graft had taken but was still very visible if you knew what to look for. I was startled, of course. Even with all the preparation, the pictures, the stories, Natalie's

face was still surprising. I did my best not to show my reaction, but something must have come through.

Natalie frowned and pulled the glasses back on. "I don't like showing them off, obviously," she said, "But I suppose you should know."

As bad as it sounds, I was glad that Natalie was the way that she looked now. She was still very pretty but didn't look as much like Nate anymore. Her face was rough but had fragileness to it. It was like the cracked face of a porcelain doll—pretty, but broken.

"Things haven't been easy, between your brother and me. It's not his fault, I know. I've started seeing a therapist about it. I'm just...angry. And he takes the brunt of it because it's all he can really do."

"I understand," I told her. In all honesty, I didn't. She looked down at the field and found Nate as the team was warming up. I followed her gaze and saw Nate raise his hand with a halfhearted smile. To my surprise, she had actually smiled back. It was still the same grin.

"It still hurts a little," she said, rubbing her jaw. "Smiling. But it gets easier. Time, you know?"

The team lost, but to be honest, I hadn't come for the game.

Da Vinci's Lady: Part 5

Nate's graduation party was almost as big as that Christmas. My aunts were mercifully less obtrusive about Natalie as she made her way up the driveway. She still preferred to wear the glasses, but they hid less of her face than before.

"Welcome back," my mother said, with a more careful hug than the last time they had met in person. Natalie embraced my mother a little tighter, as if giving her permission.

"I missed you at the last game," Natalie said. "We ended up winning by a rush."

"Well," Nate said, "it would have looked bad if I lost the last game of the season."

"So," I said, looking to Natalie, "you're doing better?"

"Much," Natalie confirmed. "And I think I have you to thank for that in part. You're very sweet."

We made our way to the backyard. The family had already gathered there, as well as a few of Nate's high school friends. Before long, things felt like they had at that first Christmas. If anyone had any reservations, they said nothing. A few questions came up over the course of the barbeque.

"Did you get that teaching job at the school you taught at a few semesters back?"

"Is the law firm going to pay well?"

"Is that a ring on your finger?"

Kate's question made everyone perk up. Collectively, our gaze shifted down to the simple ring on Natalie's finger, decorated with a sparkling stone. Natalie raised her

hand with a faint smile. “We were going to wait until after dinner, but we do have an announcement to make.”

Natalie told everyone the story of how Nate proposed. It was on the football field, last game of his college career and the last time he’d be on the field before graduation. Nate had organized for a few friends to hold up signs in the crowd, so he could propose at the end of the game. Her old dance team had convinced her to come to one last time and cheer Nate on.

“So,” Natalie continued her story over burgers, “the captain comes up to me and hands me a uniform. She said it wouldn’t feel right if I wasn’t there for the last game and said I should come back, the other girls be damned. Naturally, I wasn’t on the front of the team again, but it was good to be back where I felt like I was home.”

When they won, Natalie had rushed the field, but was floored when she turned and saw the message in the stands. “I had no idea what was coming. You should have been there when Nate proposed, though! I thought he was going to cry.”

I shoved Nate hard. “Way to not tell anyone!”

“You would have run your mouth off, you little twerp!” Nate pushed back, grinning. “Besides, we’ve been living together so long, why are you even that surprised?”

“Even I had my suspicions,” Natalie said. “It seemed fitting that he would do it at the last game.”

“Does this mean we can expect grandkids?” My mother appeared, suddenly.

“Ma!”

“It’s just a question, Nathan!”

“At least we’ll have a good idea what they’ll look like,” Natalie said, nudging Nate.

“Both our hair color, one eye each, identical noses...”

“Wait, you guys knew?” I asked.

“We dated for four years,” Nate said, shrugging, “you think no one told us we didn’t look the same?”

“I didn’t notice until my roommate said something. After that, it was just a running joke for the longest time. We almost went as each other for Halloween one year.”

“Mom always said I’d never meet anyone good enough for me. So I went and met me!”

“You are such a narcissist!” Natalie laughed, brighter than I’d seen her in a long time. Kate looked across the table at me and smirked, satisfied. Well played, Mr. Da Vinci. Well played.