

I awaken and stare at the ceiling. I groan as I pull the duvet over my head, then I take a deep breath and sit up. Hunched over, I look down at my body, but look away; I cannot bear to look at myself. To distract my mind, I turn my gaze to my room, glancing at the light filtering through the blinds, reflecting on the cracked mirror and illuminating the hickory wood floor. I open my phone to check the time, noticing my reflection beneath 7:32. I promptly turned over my phone and put it back down.

When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

I look in the mirror and see a stranger, a fragmented version of myself. I see my mind trapped in someone else's skin with no way out.

When I had had enough of myself, I didn't know what to do. I made myself trapped in another person's body.

I wore dresses more. I put on a face full of makeup. I did my nails. I changed myself beyond recognition. I tightened the chains.

I was confused when I saw everyone being themselves. How could they be so happy when everything felt so utterly wrong? This feeling festered and became jealousy. While I couldn't bear to look at myself in the mirror, they would be taking selfies and posting them online. One day, I made a change, a small but big change, but one that would change my life forever. At the hairdressers, I asked for a shorter haircut, much to the annoyance of my mother. But walking out of there, I felt a weight lifted off my shoulders.

At that point, I didn't know why I felt this way, but it stayed with me for a while, until my next haircut, where I asked for it to be even shorter. I loved how I looked. I felt different, but somehow right.

I made some small changes in my life, such as wearing less feminine clothes and wearing binders. My life was turned upside down. But it seemed that for the first time in my life, it was right side up.

Where I had once felt trapped and caged, I felt like I was breaking through the bars and soaring free. I broke the chains that had tied me down, freeing myself from who I once was. When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

Now I see myself, truly myself.

**Sophie, MIV**

## BLUR

Bang! Bang!

A cloud of smoke billowed into the night's sky, evaporating faintly away.

"Go!"

There was urgency in the plea. Jean Valjean's eyes gazed at him sadly in the dark, two pinpricks of light that were swimming with pity.

Javert could hear a ringing in his ears. He stood still for a fraction of a second, not moving a muscle. His heart pounded ferociously in his chest, and he felt the heat flow through him as thick, angry blood and adrenaline coursed through his veins.

What had he done? Why had he been set free? How could his sins be forgiven?

The wind whistled eerily in his ears, as if his piercing heart was wailing in harmony with the howling wind. Javert stumbled clumsily up the cold, stone stairs, his feet feeling as heavy as two blocks of thick lead. When at last he could go no higher, he shuffled slowly towards the very centre of the high, towering bridge. Below him, icy water crashed violently, a hungry black hole, sucking all happiness and inkling of hope out of the vicinity.

From where he stood, teetering on tips of his toes at the very edge, he could see the beautiful Notre Dame glimmering in the distance, a fierce symbol of hope amongst the desolate misery of the sad, grey ruins that were once his home, all of what was left of the remaining debris of abandoned, deserted, and ransacked streets and quays. A pale fog hung thick in the air. Javert choked on the tears that were streaming down his drained, pale face. He bit his lip to muffle his internal agony, screaming with guilt and mercy. He shivered in the gust of cool air that washed over him.

It was quiet now. The distant shots and scattered, intermittent explosions were long gone, dissolved into wisps of air, becoming nothing more than a memory. Javert could feel his hands trembling by his side, so he clenched them furiously, knuckles white in determination. He closed his eyes. His breath was fast and shaky. In his head he could still hear the echoing reverberations of gunshots and envisage piles of lifeless, limp soldiers laying splayed on the uninviting, cold concrete. When he opened his eyes again and saw how far he was from the water level, he groaned and felt a wave of nausea undulate uncomfortably through his queasy stomach.

The cold nipped at his fingers. He was oblivious to it. A strong gale of wind slapped him squarely across the face; he didn't bat an eyelid. All that was flooding into his mind was one man, a man who had haunted him for many years, by the name of Jean Valjean. A man, who, despite having been held captive for years and years, had set him free. Was it possible that a man could be so kind and generous? Oh, how he hated himself in that moment! How he despised himself for feeling so merciless and cruel to a man who had stolen but a loaf of bread just to satisfy his family's empty stomachs! How could a man like him, so inhumane and cold-hearted, earn the right to carry on living when so many innocent lives had been blatantly taken away that night?

Javert swayed on the very edge of the bridge. If he let go now, it would all be over; he would no longer have to suffer this inflicted pain and guilt. The butterflies were wild in his stomach, fluttering in a frenzy and jolt of nerves.

Javert sobbed and choked, brow furrowed, sweat glistening with beads of perspiration on his forehead. His eyes panned across the bleak landscape.

Five.

There was no hope anymore, he decided. If he was caught, he would be tortured to death and live the rest of his life in imprisonment.

Four.

Javert felt helpless; his lower lip trembled and his whole body tensed, quaking in fear.

Three.

A ceiling of clouds obscured the stars that were cold and white. Javert was plunged into the utmost darkness, his constricted pupils staring below into the void of darkness and death: his fate.

Two.

His clammy fingers tingled in anticipation and fear...

One.

"I cannot escape from this world," Javert muttered, "I live but in hell."

He let go.

Slowly, cautiously, he leaned ever so slightly backwards, his arms outstretched, his eyelids firmly shut, his teeth gritted.

A black blur tumbled gracelessly in the air, meeting the icy water with a sickening crunch. For a split second, the water glowed a fiery red. Then, a wave passed over it, and the water was black once more.

**Beatrice C, UV**

## FLASHBACK

Trickling off my hat and dribbling down the sides of my aged face was the same old rain I had seen many times before. Approaching the cafe on the other side, my dog, Scudo, pulled me across the road, dodging the vehicles as they screeched to a halt and chucked their fumes out at me. As we reached the curb I felt a sense of relief as, although I didn't see it, a tug on the lead and a whizz of cold air behind me indicated that there had just been a near miss between the motorcycle and I.

Three steps across the pavement, the last one greater to avoid a loose slab of concrete that I didn't want to trip on, and I stretched my arm out, about shoulder height, to grasp the door handle. Scudo lead me in as the monotonous clanging of the bell alerted the baristas that I was here. Warm air gushing towards me created a sense of safety from the chaos outside. I brushed past the counter to my table, which I knew would be available for me. It always is. There was just enough room between the table and the banquette for me to squeeze in, but I didn't mind as I have become used to tight spaces.

I took off my hat and placed it beside me. My tea, croissant and water were delivered to me, and I organised my table in my usual fashion. Water in the top right corner, croissant to the left and tea right in front of me. I didn't put sugar in my tea as that was a luxury I had become accustomed to not having. I could hear the whoosh of the coffee machine like a supply train letting off steam. The morning sunlight shone through the glass doors and warmed the right side of my face as the steamy mug warmed my battered hands. After finishing every last crumb, the waitress came to clear my table. Suddenly a child's scream shot through my ears like a bullet. I sat bolt upright as that familiar old fear returned.

The child's mother apologised sincerely to me and then I could hear the mother instructing her that she mustn't scream simply because she couldn't have what she wanted. Although their conversation was now significantly quieter, I didn't struggle to hear a word of it. She told her daughter that she must be more aware of her surroundings and that 'the old man next to us' wouldn't be used to such loud noises and that she was sure I had lived a quiet life. At this I smiled wryly to myself at their obliviousness.

The nasty familiarity of cramped spaces soon returned and what had been background noise suddenly came to the forefront of my attention. Clattering crockery and coffee mugs were like the rattling buckles of a combat helmet, the swing door to the kitchens screeching like a tank-hatch in need of lubrication and the banging of tin milk jugs on the counter like a round of bullets being fired. The earthy smell of roasted coffee beans became a musty odour. Screwing up my face at the anamnesis of terror, my wrinkles deepened: wrinkles which came at too young an age; sight which was lost at too young an age.

I thought it time to go so I put on my hat, adjusted my medals and left the table with Scudo. Opening the door with my senses hyperalert like when leaving the trenches, we made our way back across the street and home.

**Bella M, UV**