

## chapter 2

# *camera obscura*

Oh, fantasy free me  
So you can't see me  
No, not at all  
In another dimension  
With voyeuristic intention  
Well secluded, I see all

-Richard O'Brien "The Time Warp"

Light outside and darkness inside, a chamber sealed by a pane of glass: what you get is a mirror. Magicians used to use a sheet of glass like this to create the appearance of a ghost floating on stage, projecting the half present image of an actor performing in the wings. Imagine we're hovering outside Angel's window looking in. It's the type of thing Angel imagines, sometimes paranoid someone is looking in, sometimes fantasizing his soul has left his body. It's still dark inside, we can't see anything, and as we're not really there, we certainly can't see our bodies, just the reflection of city lights.

If you listen you can hear Angel coming even though he's trying to be quiet, he doesn't want to wake anyone up. He tries to break down the smell in the hallway to its components, it's less nauseating that way. Cooking smells mingle: fried food, curries, burnt beans. There's a layer of old lady smells, rose water and farts. There's always stale cigarette smoke, usually pot, cigars, crack smoke filters in only a little less often than a few years back. Sometimes there's the smell of urine, but fortunately not tonight.

Keys jangle, scrape of the bolt, the metal body of the door feels cool below his palm. Hinges squeak open, but with no light in the hallway the crack is only as visible as graphite on charcoal. A wheel creases the cellophane window of an envelope, a tread mark crossing his name—the sound passing below notice.

The switch is tossed. Light. Our mirror becomes a window. The first thing Angel does when he enters this room is look out. It's inevitable really, the city laid out like this is an irresistible image. He's looking from the top floor of a project in Bed-Stuy. The room is a jumble of flea market furniture and broken things: vcrs, computers. There are piles of musty science fiction paperbacks. It's not much a place but there's one hell of a view; if it was on the Jersey bluffs instead of the hills of Brooklyn it fetch millions.

In the time it takes him to glance, a thought speeds through his mind like a meteor entering the atmosphere, and like a meteor it burns out. Some things move too fast to hold together. People can streak out like that too, there are times and places only too likely to provide the velocity. Unlike people (hauntings, reincarnations, and resurrections aside) thoughts can come again, all is not lost.

I'm glad to see that Angel's made it home safe and sound. It's probably not a big deal to you, but it matters to me. Tonight he was the one with the most to lose and things were closer to the verge of being smashed than it appeared. In fact, as so many times before, his well learned ability to hide his vulnerability kept him safe.

Things can be hidden in plain sight if you know what you're doing. For instance, there used to be a rumor that dealers at raves hide LSD in Pez dispensers. Its the type of thing that ends up in television exposés about "today's youth." I have to say, it does seem vaguely scandalous if you don't think about it too hard. I suppose that's because its an example of the way kid stuff gets pushed together with the dark and naughty adult world of sex and drugs. No one wonders so much what's wrong with our culture that a generation of kids would get off on just that collision.

The thing about Pez was probably just made up, but like someone once said— "the imaginary is that which tends to become real." Angel heard those stories and got inspired. For as long as he's gone to parties his brother has been hiding drugs in the frame of his wheelchair. People feel too guilty to look there even if they think to look. Leave it to Angel though to build an ecstasy dispenser right into the arm. It's so cleanly designed you'd think it was on the original spec sheet. I swear this is true, Angel is such a geek, he worked on it for weeks.

It bears saying that Angel is attached to his chair. You might think this is obvious the way he's stuck in it, but what I mean is it has gotten to seem like part of his body. In his senior class year book he was voted "most likely to become a cyborg." The implication of this it that without the chair Angel can't go anywhere, he has no way to get there. Unlike

Jenny who sold her last tabs, or Luna who was able to swallow the two e's (hers and Canada's) she had just mooched, Angel was quite literally stuck sitting on a goodly load of empathogens when the police raided the party. He has plans for the future, he has dreams. He's already lost the past, losing the future too— that would be too much.

Angel surveys the cityscape. Paterson's loft has to be down there somewhere, but he can't quite place it. I could go into a spiel about how things can change so fast that when we catch our breath and look back, the places we knew have gone all unrecognizable. Or how other times we can change and the world never looks the same again. Sometimes both happen at once and it leaves you asking: has everything changed or is it just me? In this case though, nothing has changed all that much, certainly not the architecture. The disorientation has more to do with perspective.

Up here you're a detached eye, like that eye on the top of the pyramid, the one on the back of every dollar. You feel like you don't have a body, no one can touch you. On the street the city seems fractured, it wraps around you; you're flesh amongst flesh, it's all bump and jostle, people get lost, things can happen, you take your chances. Up above the city takes on order, becomes distant, separate, a thing, a sculpture made from slabs of concrete, glass, steel and light. Of these of course, only the light travels, carrying the image of the rest, throbbing forward over the gap of the East River.

Of the billions upon billions of photons that burn their way out of electric filaments, ping off Manhattan, and speed away, some small fragment make their way to this window, fewer penetrate unreflected, and of those, some infinitesimal portion make their way into the cavity of Angel's eye. But it's enough. Enough to make an image.

In that image skyscraper peaks reach white into the bruise colored sky over roofs of Williamsburg and Greenpoint. The wedge of the CitiCorp floats, the scaly pinnacle of the Chrysler arcs, the Empire pushes its volume up through midtown to a hypodermic point. They're much further away, but still they dwarf the spires of even the tallest churches in Brooklyn: the dome of the Orthodox temple on Driggs, the pointy shingled steeple beyond it. Behind the churches stretch the casings of the Williamsburg Bridge, its base obscured by the sugar refinery on the river's shore.

Angel remembers the view from the bridge; his memory slides back through years to a sweaty summer afternoon. His brother Noah had spent all their money on records and they couldn't afford to take the subway back across the river. Of course they still had to get home, so Noah pushed him in the wheelchair all the way down from Washington Square Park then on the pedestrian path up across the bridge.

When he was younger, Angel was full of questions. He asked Noah how people got across the river before the bridge. Ferries, his brother explains. The family took the Staten Island Ferry once, to see the Statue of Liberty. Angel says he wants to take the

ferry again, but what he really means is that he wants to visit Liberty Island. Part of Angel still can't believe you can go inside the statue; his mother wouldn't spend the money. Noah snaps back, "Child, who's pushing you? You are getting a fairy ride."

Maybe this was Angel's way of finding his way back to the moment he had the sensation of flying. The bridge tipped up at an angle so that all he saw was open sky. It was the first time he realized he was seeing the sky without the anchor of skyline. It must have happened before when he stared at a patch of dirt or grass or up into the leaves of a tree, but this was the first time he realized that there was nothing man-made in his field of vision, not even jet trails. He imagined himself through the blue ceiling into the infinite expanse of empty black universe.

Angel was called back from his waking dream of sky and space by his brother's arm stretched out, pointing out the place in the middle of the bridge where you could see the Statue of Liberty. It was unwrapped now, but his first memory of it was from the days when it was being repaired, blocked in scaffolding. When he was little he thought that was just the way it always was, how could he know any better? The first time he saw the giantess without a cage she looked naked and fragile. From his angle the statue seemed entwined in the high tension wires of the Brooklyn Bridge, not a protective cage but like a fly ensnared in a spiders web. Then Noah's arm changed. Angel had a flash of the chalky skin, as pale as the white tape holding in the feeding tube. Angel pulled back from the memory, that day must have been just before Noah got sick.

His brother gone— still an impossible thought. He remembers his first departure, the loud one. The bright dresses that had been hidden in his brother's closet drift like giant butterflies down the side of the building. His mother's wet mascara smearing two jagged holes into her face, a shriek, like the sound of something dying, she jams the final garment, a wedding gown, through the bars of the window. The dress explodes in a plume of white on the other side. The wind holds it spread against the window, and it clings there like a dream trying to hold to its dreamer. Her shriek becomes the scream of the bride plummeting when gravity finally takes it— the veil hangs for a moment longer, more a white shadow than a thing, until the wind turns and it too is gone.

Angel looks down as if following his brothers dresses where they landed in the field across that street, years ago. That was another apartment building, a different place. He remembers watching his mother rushing after the gown when she realized it was her own. While she was gone, Noah grabbed what he could that was left of what mattered to him and hunched away like thief ejected from some primeval orchard.

Angel tries to imagine the city, or maybe better to say the island, as it looked before the buildings and the bridges. Before it was New York, New Amsterdam, Manhattan. It was once a wilderness, the hunting ground of proud Mohicans. Its hard to think this was

ever a natural place, not a mountain of human construction. Back then nobody, except perhaps birds, ever saw the island from up here.

If Angel could look back in time, the buildings would fall away, the lights would dim and he could see across the island out onto the plains of New Jersey. There, he might see a wooden building almost like a barn. In the dark of night, its windows glow with oil lamps, a man with woolly white hair holds a glass sphere, and the bit of carbonized thread inside goes bright. He's done this night after night, but this time is different, instead of sparking out in a pop of flame, the filament burns steady. Assistants snuff out the oil lamps and they stand together in the incandescence.

If you're still looking you can almost see the light glint again in Angel's eye as he replays the scene. He knows the secret to this kind of imagining, when you want something to seem real put in a lot of little details. In those moments when you think you're dreaming, don't pinch yourself— check the details. Is there a shine on the nose? A sparkle in the eyes? That shimmer and flow of light on water, it has a oneness to it. The next time you look at water think about this. You will never see it the same way again. And maybe that's the thing about eyes— that film of water. They say it makes up ninety some-odd-percent of our mass, but where do you see it? That flow and glare on the surface of the eye. You see that and you know where we come from.

Light from his computer monitor blots Angel's eyes white. It's an old piece of crap, but he has an affection for it. Its more than most kids like him have. His father works as a doorman on the Upper East Side; tenants throw valuable things away all the time.

The woman on the screen is typical, pale skin, long blonde hair, long soft lines. The skin looks tissuey, palpably smooth. She's a dream-girl, perfect. Zeke told him they airbrush them to get them to look that way. The girls all have pimples on their asses and mustaches before they go to them. No one's that perfect. I could do that, thinks Angel, an ideal job; sitting all day removing the pimples off pin-up girls' asses.

The image keeps loading from top to bottom; more lines fill over the top, seeming to come into focus, details becoming clearer. He feels like his eyes could just reach out and touch the skin. Looking is such an active sense that it was once believed the eye sent out rays, little feelers that apprehended the world through a special sort of touch. Imagine streams of optical spermatozoa flagellating their way through the pupil impregnating the world with the property of visibility.

Load, dammit, he thinks. Load. He pushes his hand under his belt, touching himself. He squeezes himself to the pulse of the music. It feels good. He still likes the fantasy, he can feel it, but nothing happens. He doesn't grow. What felt good sours into memories.

Angel reaches into the bag of cheese doodles he keeps next to the computer. They leave a coat of grease and florescent orange cheese but don't fill the emptiness. He tries

to let go to the music, let it carry him away. Most of the time, music is the only thing that saves him from feeling sorry for himself, hating himself, the world, his life. Sometimes not even music can dig him out, like tonight. He would care that his stomach was getting bigger if he thought he had a chance of getting a girlfriend. But he has conceded that girls are, like everything more than four feet off the ground, beyond his reach.

He remembers Luna sitting on his lap, sucking up to him to get him to "loan her," she says, a couple of e's. As if she were going to spit the pills back up when she was done. He might get the money, but he knows Luna thinks she's already paid him, just by sitting there, teasing him, frustrating him. She thinks that was worth forty bucks to him? And still, he gave her the e's. Those words stick in his mind— "I'll pay you back."

It was almost funny the way Luna darted around the cop; the cop almost falling down. This probably made things worse for her though, because now the cop felt humiliated, it became personal. Angel remembers the lines in her face as the cop yanked her arm behind her back, almost picking her up. He seemed to do it more thoughtlessly than cruelly, three times her size. She wouldn't concede a sound to the physical pain, but let an anguished cry as the camera was ripped away.

Luna seemed exposed, vulnerable without the camera. Its as if when they took away her eye they were taking away her shell. We can never know if the eye began as a primarily defensive or a predatory adaptation, but think what became possible with the evolution of the eye, not just the ability to see danger coming, but rational killing, sneaking up on prey, laying in wait. It's been proposed that the eye changed everything, without the hunters eye killing off the slow and the soft there would be no shells, no skeletons, no arms, no legs. In a blind world oceans team with drifting shapeless cell colonies and nothing more. I'm fabulating again, perhaps confabulating, it really could have happened anywhere in the great Cambrian sea, but as it turns out, New York is fertile ground for the fossils of those first creatures with sight. Why not suppose that the shores of Manhattan are the place where the look was returned?

Angel expected Luna's camera to shatter and explode like it would have in a movie, but instead it bounced and skidded, bits of plastic skittering. The cops hand yanked out the cassette, ripping off the cassette door with it, which was already hanging loose. His foot falls, cassette crunching under boot.

"Fucking idiots," thinks Angel. As if smashing the case was going to do anything. Its what's inside that matters. The cops went back to intimidating her and picking drugs off the floor; they never saw him reach down. Echoing that previous gesture Angel reaches down again pulling the broken cassette from a pocket on the side of the chair. All he has to do is find some crappy old cassette he doesn't care about and switch the tape inside. His eyes scan the table for the right screw driver.

The tape isn't a regular VHS tape, its one of the little ones they use in camcorders. Fortunately he has a machine that can play it, something else his father brought home from work. His father believes he can repair anything, this camera though, the lens is cracked, he can't do anything about that. It will still work fine to play back those little tapes like Luna's though. People can be so stupid, Angel thinks again, something is half broken and they throw it out, no patience to see what it's still good for.

When his father brags about how he can fix things, his mother always suggests he should become a repair man. It makes him cringe and want to tell her to shut the fuck up. He has bigger dreams than that. She thinks she's telling him that he can (still) do something while protecting him from failure, disappointment. He hears something else: don't start thinking you can't achieve too much, settle for what's in reach. Don't dream.

Maybe this thought makes Angel go tense because the cassette case cracks in his hands and spews folds of brown black tape onto his lap. One of the spools rolls out of the shell and down his leg, spinning out oxidized copper loops as it goes.

Dropping the spool sets something off, filling him with the feeling prey must feel as the predator draws close, the door to an ominous future opening... a door like a mouth or a mouth like a door. He has to take a deep breath. When you have an experience that forces you to feel more than you can take in at once, the lost feelings, the excess, come back in waves. He feels for a second how real losing everything was, how close. He's reminded of photos of workers building the first skyscrapers, balancing on beams high over the city. The power of these images seem to be how they make you certain they were taken only seconds before these men fell. Or maybe the power is their uncertainty, the not knowing which would live and which would die, as if the camera were the eye of fate trying to decide.

In the sea, plankton are those creatures pulled along with the tide, nekton are those strong enough to swim against it. We move through the world, we make choices, and yet there seems to be a force pulling us irresistibly into the future. The future rushes up behind our backs so fast it feels we're falling, like we've fallen off a building... we can count the rows of windows as they pass, but we can never know how many stories are left below. As we fall things are smashed or lost, or like Angel, things unseen hit us from behind and leave us broken, feeling split in two. We choose, we act, we think we are nekton, but in relation to time we are plankton, we move with time, we cannot resist the flow. It seems that we can know no more of time than plankton know the tide.

Angel wipes the cheese and grease onto his jeans and carefully begins to roll the tape back onto the reel. He's fixing what has been broken, pulling back what has been lost. As we fall through time I think we all wish, now and then, that someone would catch us, reel us back in, find the fragments, unsmash the shattered, make us whole. The longer

we fall, the more we realize this is just a wish. The living call this hope.

Minutes later Angel is finished, and with a push of his fingertips the player swallows the repaired cassette. As the tape rolls through blank leader Angel looks out above the city. The sky is dark, his eyes go black. He'd be looking right at us, maybe through us, if we were there— but we're not. He looks for a moon, but she's gone missing. Even when you can see a few bright stars over Manhattan, the city lights drown the rest, from here you never see the milky blur of a billion distant fires. Tonight he finds just one.

That's all he needs though to revive the lost thought that had flitted through his head. It's still impossible to think: because it takes time for light to travel to your eye, we are always looking into the past. The further away something is, the longer the light takes, the further back you're looking. This is what his Physics teacher said, but it still seems wrong. Doesn't seeing happen all at once, right when the light hits your retina?

But does get it, that star for instance, something awful could have happened to it. It could have died, gone supernova, and he wouldn't know for years. If he were closer the gap in time would be less, but even right next to it, there would always be some distance, some space to cross, some time taken— light must travel. Even when I look at your face, so close, the photons bounce off an instant before my optic nerve fires. Maybe, he thinks, if I were right in the center of it, became the light, the burning center of the star. Can light see its own illumination? Or would he see nothing, know nothing, be nothing.

He looks back down the island at the pulsing beacon atop the antenna on the World Trade Center, lights whirl around the helicopter pad on the other tower. You can look into the lens of his eye and see that image reflected back. It is said that eyes are mirrors of the soul; they are at least mirrors. He realizes he must see the beacon pulsing out of time: it is already on an instant before he sees the flash. The last instant it appears on, it has already gone off. He imagines hurtling himself toward the beacon, moving so fast the pulses come faster. He looks at himself from outside, pulses become stripes of dark and light, time becomes space. When you move at the speed of light, you lose all mass, time stops; having a body means nothing, you become a single point, infinitesimal. If he could only go a little faster time would reverse. He can imagine it, but he knows in reality not even light can go faster, it's a law, a constant, not even light can go back.

That's when he realizes something else is missing besides the moon. It's strange he's never noticed she wasn't there before. She must be back there though, just hidden from view behind the towers. She must be back there, even if he can't see her.

Then this thought too is gone. His attention is pulled away as the screen flickers from static white to darkness— a murky image forms and starts to move.