

THE STRANGE FASCINATIONS OF NOAH HYPNOTIK

By David Arnold

Chapter 1

that sadness feels heavier underwater

I'll hold my breath and tell you what I mean: I first discovered the Fading Girl two months and two days ago, soon after summer began dripping its smugly sunny smile all over the place. I was with Alan, per usual. We had fallen down the YouTube rabbit hole, which was a thing we did from time to time. Generally speaking, I hate YouTube, mostly because Alan is all, *I just have to show you this one thing, yo*, but inevitably one thing becomes seventeen things, and before I know it, I'm watching a sea otter operate a vending machine, thinking, *Where the f*** did I go wrong?* And look: I am not immune to the allure of the sea otter, but at a certain point a guy has to wonder about all the life decisions he's made that have landed him on a couch, watching a glorified weasel press H9 for a bag of SunChips.

Quiet, and a little sad, but in a real way, drifting through the Rosa-Haas pool—I f***ing love it here.

I would live here.

For the sake of precision: the Fading Girl video is a rapid time-lapse compilation of photographs clocking in at just over twelve minutes. It's entitled *One Face, Forty Years: An Examination of the Aging Process*, and underneath it a caption reads: "Daily self-portraits from 1977 to 2015. I got tired." (I love that last part, as if the Fading Girl felt the need to explain why she hadn't quite made it the full forty years.) In the beginning, she's probably in her early twenties, with blonde hair, long and shimmery, and bright eyes like a sunrise through a waterfall. At about the halfway mark the room

changes, which I can only assume means she moved, but in the background, her possessions remain the same: a framed watercolor of mountains, a porcelain Chewbacca figurine, and elephants everywhere. Statues, posters, T-shirts—the Fading Girl had an elephant obsession, safe to say. She’s always indoors, always alone, and—other than the move, and a variety of haircuts—she looks the same in every photo: no smile, staring straight into the camera, *every day for forty years*.

Always the same, until: changes.

Okay, I have to breathe now.

I love this moment: breaking the surface, inhale, wet hair in the hot sun.

Alan is all, “Dude.”

The moment would be better alone, to be honest.

“That was like a record,” says Val. “You okay?”

A few more deep breaths, a quick smile, and . . .

I love this moment even more: dipping beneath the surface. Something about being underwater allows me to feel at a higher capacity—the silence and weightlessness, I think.

It’s my favorite thing about swimming.

The earlier shots are scanned-in Polaroids, but as the time lapse progresses and the resolution of the photos increases, the brightness of the Fading Girl begins to diminish: little by little, the hair thins; little by little, the eyes dim; little by little, the face withers, the skin droops, the bright young waterfall becomes a darkened millpond, one more victim in the septic tank of aging. And it doesn’t make me sad so much as leave an impression of sadness, like watching a stone sink but never hit bottom.

Every day for forty years.

I've watched the video hundreds of times now: at night before bed, in the morning before school, in the library during lunch, on my phone during class, in my head during the in-betweens, I hum the Fading Girl like a song over and over again, and every time it ends I swear I'll never watch it again. But like the saddest human boomerang, I always come back.

Twelve minutes of staring at your screen and watching a person die. It's not violent. It's not immoral or shameful; nothing is done to her that isn't done to all of us, in turn. It's called *An Examination of the Aging Process*, but I call bullshit. That girl isn't aging; she's fading. And I can't look away.

There it is, the inevitable shoulder tap.

Time to join the land of the breathing.

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