When I begin to write a story, sometimes I have an idea of what my characters will look like, and sometimes I don't. Sometimes, the vision that I have is only partial. Perhaps a key feature of the person I'll be writing about, because it will matter a great deal to the plot. Other times, characters pop up. Sometimes they help move the plot along, the clerk at the shop, the barista in the cafe. Other times they appear on the scene and demand a bigger role. Unexpected, uninvited, but here they are and I have to scramble to know them, write them, and describe them.

The trick is to know them well enough to describe them in bits and pieces, sprinkling aspects of the character throughout the story so you don't have one long info dump as soon as they appear on stage. This means creating character profiles, because nothing makes me snort my current beverage of choice out my nose as much as reading through a manuscript and seeing that I described a character with green, brown, and gray eyes.

During PrepTober last year I decided to try my hand at using an AI generated art website to create character photos. The object was to take a blank slate and bring my characters to life. The biggest hiccup I had, outside of asking a robot to create the perfect image, was that I didn't have a clear idea of what any of my characters looked like. That's not quite true, I had one specific feature for one of my characters. That was all I had to work with.

This was one of those situations where I knew one character's background, and everyone else's future. Staring at the blank canvas was considerably harder than staring at the blank page. What should Tate look like? What color was his hair? Did he have any features about him that would be noticeable? I had no answers to any of those questions. The funny thing is, that having a clear idea of what a character should look like in your mind made it just as difficult to create the *perfect* image.

In a previous story I wrote about a quartet of brothers, three of whom looked similar while one looked more like his mother. I could picture all four brothers in my mind, pulling features from people I'd seen while out and about, from tv shows or movies. And somehow, the swirl of features, voices, and looks made sense to me. Bringing them to life on paper was far easier than generating photos of them on ArtBreeder. Not impossible, mind you, but time consuming enough that I begin to wonder what on earth I'm doing and why.

After creating one of the brothers a year ago, I laughed so hard my sides hurt. Then I closed the website and got back to writing. Having written out their stories and watching each character become their own person it was easier to return to the website and take another spin with my characters. It's still time consuming, and while it has some fun value there was also frustration at just how much of my writing time it ate up: all of it.

It also took a lot of patience, learning, and guessing. Then I passed images around my writing group and had people say, "I can picture that…" or "That terrifies me!" Both of which are often accurate. When I returned to the website while composing this very post, I asked my husband to give the thumbs up or down to the characters I'm about to introduce you to. He's read their entire story in all its raw glory. He had images in his head of perfect actors to play their roles, and like most readers also had a vision of what everyone would look like. He knew the overall idea that I was trying to put forth to the reader who has read the book, and to those who haven't.

Did it work? I'm not sure, that might have to be something for you to decide. The photos at the top of this post are characters I created for one of my books and its sequel.

Author's Note:

 Is it a solid win for me? That's where I'm uncertain. It's so much easier to open my browser, and search the internet for random things like: elderly woman, or grumpy old man. To find a photo that conveys what I'm writing about and work with it. It's also pretty easy to search for facial features if I'm in need. Although I've also been known to just look in the mirror, or have a family member make said face while I write.

Still, there is something about flipping my notebook open and seeing smiling faces staring up at me wondering what's taken me so long to settle in at the writing desk and get down to businesses for the day. A bit of encouragement on those difficult writing days.