

The Girl in the Mirror

A single lily, not unlike the one at my mother's funeral, sat in a vase in front of my hotel door. Its petals were wilted, devoid of life. One dropped into the ebony fluid below, reminding me of a sailor fighting a losing battle against a tumultuous ocean.

Today had been deadly cold, the wind a sharp blade of ice permeating through my thick cloak. I had hurried into the closest hotel I could find, not pausing at the unwavering stare that the boy at the concierge desk fixed me with, nor his peculiar, outdated uniform. I quickly took an elevator up to my room on the sixth floor. Dozens of fluorescent bulbs flickered in the hallway, and the sound of my tapping feet echoed on the asbestos tiles. A cadenced trill of dripping water was audible through the door. Probably a leaky faucet.

As I lifted my room key, I noticed my hotel room door was slightly ajar. Observing a scratch on the second of the three sixes, my palms turned damp, and my mouth felt like sandpaper.

The eye was drawn to the scratch; it seemed to crystallize and magnify all the gloom humming in the air. The key cut into my palm as I slowly lowered my hand. Fighting my rising emotions, I pushed the door open, peering into the room as I walked in. A musty, moldy smell immediately clogged my throat. The yellow paint was peeling off the wall in strips and bubbles, revealing a marred grey wall underneath. The battered wooden floors were poorly concealed with a scuffed carpet, fraying at the edges. There were blotches in several places on the floor, rust-colored smears that released a metallic odor when I bent to look closer. I took off my coat and flung it onto the bed, causing a cloud of dust to rise and then settle still. The window was open, but there was a noticeable absence of wind. Save for the creaks of the floorboards beneath my feet, there was no sound. Except for that incessant dripping sound. Why was it so goddamn loud? I pressed my hands to my ears, but the sound continued. It was deafening, an echo that drove so deep inside my skull that it was less like an actual sound than a wall slamming down hard in my mind and driving me back to the childhood memory that I had attempted to smother in thick and stifling layers of antidepressants.

An eleven-year-old me, walking into the bathroom of my then home and feeling my blood curdle in sheer terror as my mind failed to comprehend the sight before me. A scream congealed in my throat, too big to be let loose.

My mother had stared at me, hanging from the rafters, mouth contorted in a gruesome leer. Her body swayed gently from side to side above a pool of maroon water. Written on the linoleum tiles were the crabbed letters: **THERE IS NO ESCAPE**. The mirror was shattered and splintered. The toilet was duct-taped shut. My eyes traced drops of blood as they meandered down her body before dripping into the bathtub like that of some perverse faucet.

Plink.

Plink.

I had finally found my voice and screamed, my wails of terror echoing through the halls of my house.

Another *plink* brought me back to reality. I needed to stop that noise. I grabbed the bathroom doorknob, and an image flashed through my mind, a girl in the bathtub, thick drops of blood oozing from a dozen cuts. Swallowing with some difficulty, I wondered for the second time today, was the handle already slick, or was it my own perspiration? I ran my other hand over the weathered oak as my hand slipped repeatedly.

The bathroom was small and smelled of mothballs. A single grimy light bulb illuminated all but the farthest corners, leaving the mind to wonder what lurked there. A toilet, dusty and filled with cobwebs, sat in the corner. The bathtub was miraculously empty, with only the odd stain or two. A dripping tap was present under a cracked mirror. I turned the faucet all the way off, sighing when the dripping sound finally receded. It felt like all the energy had returned to my body. I could finally breathe again.

Plink. A sudden chill swept through my bones. My throat tightened. *What is going on?* I double-checked the faucet. Completely off. Another *plink*. These drops sounded very substantial. Too thick to be water. My hands wouldn't stop shaking, and my breath came rapidly. I turned on the tap and splashed myself in a desperate attempt to get the sound to stop. When I looked up into the mirror, a girl, no older than 10, stared back at me. *Is she behind the glass?* I tilted my head, and she looked back at me. Her eyes, a brilliant emerald green, were full of life. Her vibrant brown hair was plaited, and she played with it idly. She smiled winningly at me. Her teeth were so white it was almost blinding.

Another vision. The same girl, strung up to the bathroom rafters by a length of wire, feet dangling over the bathtub. Drops of liquid rolled down her body from a slit neck. A boy's head emerged from the toilet, spindly arms with sallow skin reaching out. The boy's mouth opened, and spiders spilled forth, crawling toward the girl's unmoving body.

Reality came crashing back. I splashed myself again, trying to peel away the images seared into my brain. The water pouring out of the tap turned into blood, and I screamed. The blood was everywhere. It dripped into my eyes. It stained my shirt. It glided sluggishly over the sink edge and pooled around my feet, gradually covering every inch of the bathroom floor. Bile filled my mouth. I closed my eyes, trying to will all of this away. When I opened them, the only thing in the tap was water.

I looked into the mirror again and took an involuntary step back. The girl's hair now hung limp and motionless, plastered to her forehead. She let out a slow groan as she stretched. I stifled a shriek as I saw her neck, almost completely severed from her body. Her eyes were dull, haunted, like dark pits filled with snakes. As I watched, long gashes appeared down her forearms. A vague memory of my mother's childhood portrait tugged at me. The girl stepped quickly forward, mouthing something I couldn't make out. A bloodless finger tapped slowly on the mirror. I stepped back again, ready to turn tail and run, when I crashed into the boy from the concierge desk.

"Hello," he smiled ghoulishly as I struggled to regain my footing. Had he been standing behind me the entire time? The mirror shuddered, cracks spider-webbing across its surface. The girl seemed to be screaming. Something about getting away. I ignored her. She slowly stepped back, walking back into the deep reaches of her mirror, hands making an ancient sign for warding off evil. As soon as I turned my focus back to the boy, I noticed some minor details. The boy was very tall, almost my height. All skin and bones. Pupils that seemed to change color. Pins and badges in the jacket that hadn't been in use since the '80s. His constant grin showcasing a mouth full of slightly crimson-stained teeth. Nails filed to a knife-like point.

A feeling of hostility pervaded his entire frame. I walked forward cautiously, stepping around him. His wolfish eyes tracked my every step. As I reached for the knob, he grabbed my forearm. I shook my arm, but his grip was like a vise, tightening with every second. I looked back at him. A spider darted across his face and disappeared into the folds of his jacket as fast as it had appeared. Déjà vu tugged at me as his smile turned icy cold. The sunlight landed on his skin, and the mirage flickered, revealing a skeleton with a bloody stake impaled through its forehead. It hit me; this was the boy in the vision. The smile disappeared as the boy lunged at me. One hand muffled my screams as the other cut deeper and deeper into my throat.

No escape. The thought ricocheted through my brain.

The last thing I saw was the girl staring sadly at me through the mirror.