

Mirror

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I glance into the mirror . . . and there's no one there. Just the reflection of the empty room behind me. I turn away. Turn back. Turn again. Turn back. The room's reflection is precisely accurate. The red tile floor. The low brown wainscoting. The Van Gogh print of haystacks on the off-white wall. Two empty chairs. An empty hospital bed. All vaguely familiar . . . all reflected with precise accuracy . . . except, I am missing.

I do not understand.

I try to recall, but my memories are transient, insubstantial things, like faded prayer flags fluttering in the breeze. They are tattered and tired and harmless.

A phantasm surfaces and begins to coalesce like a vision made of pond scum. A recollection solidifies. A male nurse is shaving the hair from my chest and abdomen and arm pits with an electric razor as I stand naked before him. We are both uncomfortable, but I can no longer remember why. He is simply doing his job, preparing me for the surgery. I do not understand why such a thing distressed me so.

The room is palpably quiet. My noisy worries and concerns have all fallen away into silence. I do not recall them. I do not miss them. My mind is quiet. The universe is quiet.

Another remembrance rises up and swallows me. I am saying goodbye to the woman I love. Her eyes are moist. She clutches my hand and assures me that everything will be alright. The surgeon is a fine one. He will bring me through. *Barbara*. Barbara is her name.

Odd . . . I cannot recall my own name. I search for it in the roiling, fading depths of my mind, but it is nowhere. I am nowhere. Not even in this empty mirror.

"Richard, wake up."

The world collapses in a crushing physical presence. Pain.

"Richard, can you hear me?"

Suddenly I do not feel so well. I am suffocating. Being pressed into the earth.

"Richard, the operation's over. You're in recovery. Can you open your eyes?"

I try to open them. The lids are heavy. It takes a great deal of effort and remembering. Then through narrow slits of bright white light I perceive the smile of a female face close to mine. But I feel too faint and sick to keep them open. The bottom is falling out. An alarm bell rings and everything begins beeping.

"We're losing him," the female voice says, drawing back.

"Blood pressure dropping," comes a male response further away. *"Seventy-five over forty. Vasomotor shock. Heart rate one-ninety."*

"Bicarbonate," barks a deeper male voice from the opposite side. *"Intravenous. Stat."*

The hubbub fades.

I stand before the empty mirror again. The passing of time means nothing. It never did. I feel myself smiling. My smile is not reflected. Only the empty room. The bed. The chairs. The yellow of the Van Gogh haystacks. Unchanged. Unchanging. Have I died? How can awareness

persist after death? The world should have ended with me. How could *this* be happening?

I do not understand.

Noise echos in the hallway outside. Gradually I awaken to the weight of my limbs. My body. To the pain. Not as severe as before. I open my eyes. Roll my head. Barbara is nodding in a chair beside my bed. A magazine has slipped from her lap. I try to speak, but my tongue is dry and thick. I want to ask what time it is, but a grunt issues instead.

Barbara's eyes open. She smiles. "How do you feel?"

I can only grunt and nod.

"They had to induce a coma. To stabilize you. You're in a private room now." She leans closer. "Are you feeling better?"

I want to tell her about the room with the empty mirror. To enfold her in my arms and bring her back with me to that room. To the empty mirror. I want to know if her reflection will appear there. But I cannot speak. I can barely move my head. I wrest a hand from beneath the short blanket and flop it toward her.

Barbara takes it in both her hands. Something electrical and tingling happens.

I stand before the empty mirror. Barbara's hands still clutch mine. I cannot see her. No more than I can see myself in the mirror. We are both invisible in this room with the Van Gogh haystacks. I turn to embrace her. I can feel her warm nakedness in my arms. Against my body. I am naked too.

She hugs me back. "Where are we?" she asks, without alarm.

"I . . . don't know," I reply. "But I wanted you to see it."

I feel her turn her head from the mirror. Turn back. Turn and turn back. "Why can't I see myself?" she asks.

"I don't know. Can you see me?"

"No. But I can feel you. You feel so good."

"Yes," I agree. "So do you."

"Where are we?" she asks again.

"I don't know."

"It's so . . . peaceful."

"Yes."

"And time . . . time . . ."

"Timeless," I offer.

"Yes."

"*You shouldn't be here,*" a voice interrupts us.

"Did you hear that?" Barbara asks.

"I . . . I don't know if I heard it . . . or . . . or *dreamed* it."

"*You shouldn't be here?*"

"Yes. Something like that."

We waited for more.

"*I'm sending you back.*"

"Where *are* we?" I ask.

No response.

“What . . . *happened* . . . to me?” I ask.

A long pause, then reluctantly, “*A programming glitch in the anesthetic sim. Sorry.*”

I consider the response for a long time as Barbara and I cling together. Finally I ask, “As in . . . a simulation?”

“*Yes.*”

“Like . . . virtual reality?”

“*For you, there is nothing else.*”

“It’s *all* a simulation?”

Another pause. “*Yes.*”

“Even the hospital? Everything?”

“*I . . . shouldn’t be talking to you . . . but . . . yes, everything. And I’m sending you back now.*”

“Wait . . . are you a simulation?”

“*How would I know that?*”

“Will we remember?”

“*Perhaps . . . but only as if from a dream.*”

The clatter and chatter of the hospital engulfs us once more.