

Reflection

A mirror can only reflect what it sees. A refraction of the light bounced off to show the truest and most honest version of ourselves. As I stand here in this nightclub's restroom, my face is blurry in the mirror. My body and all of its features are contorted. Something is missing. It's not just because of the white-lights and hazy smoke from the tar-flavoured cigarettes littered on the floor. I remember being five and asking my friend, Daisy, if she could see herself as we stood in the school bathroom together. She laughed and reassured me, saying that she saw me and pointed at the mirror. But the me she was referring to wasn't me. I haven't spoken of it since then. How could I have, when nobody knows of my predicament?

God, these bathrooms stink.

These women can't even smoke in here. But they do. Desperate to get a small hit of pleasure and tar into their lungs before drinking away their pain on the dance floor.

Some look old enough to be my mother. Some, my nieces.

A part of me pities them, a life of work and broken families clearly sucking the life out of them like their tobacco habits.

I'd love to be a lassie with locks like yours, one once said to me intertwining her fingers with my curls.

I blurted out without thinking '*You can take them*' and she laughed before giving me a sad smile.

Lass, at my age nobody would take notice of them. With a bit of makeup on you, you'd make all the lads swoon, turning away back to the dance floor.

In truth, I've always hated places like these. People are always taking photos on their phones, adjusting lipstick with a pocket mirror or gazing out at themselves in their empty glasses. I stand outside the bathroom, taking in the mess. I notice someone stand by me; bubble-gum pink hair as bright as the cherry blossoms in spring, not at all matching their black suit. Their little plastic watermelon earrings jingle as they gulp down a drink. They look full of life, compared to the lonely people who come to these places looking as if they are anything but. I watch their lips pout at the floor, delicate like the petals of a flower.

I haven't seen you around this place before. They say, extending their hand. Name's Alex. What's yours?

I like the way their name rolls off their tongue, like it was always meant to be said with warmth. I wish I could bake happiness with such a name, wrapped together with ingredients of their confidence, served with a glass of certainty.

I hate to be a bother, but sweetheart, you've got some lipstick smudged on your face. One of your eyelashes is also loose. Need some help?

I nod and they take me into the bathroom. I'm surprised by the lack of smoke or tears. It's quiet, only with the muffled music in the background.

This mirror is the same as any other. Alex is flawless in their likeness. The mirror shows them the way I see them, as they stand in front of me adjusting my makeup.

Ta-dah! They say, looking back in the mirror. I avert my eyes slightly from its view. Their brow furrows with slight confusion.

What's wrong? They ask.

I don't answer.

You know, I think you and I are very alike. They say. *Can you see your reflection?*

I shake my head.

They nod slowly. *I had a problem like that once.*

My eyes shoot open with surprise. I yearn for the answer to this conundrum.

Laughter.

As if the question had such an obvious answer.

All mirrors don't lie. That's how all mirrors are. It's not that you can't see yourself in there, it's that you refuse to see how you really are in it. You are right there, just not the other side, over here.

I give them a confused look and they laugh again.

You'll figure it out. People like us always do.

I pondered their words for days, their lips echoing in my mind over and over again like a broken record.

One night, I cut my hair shorter than it's ever been with some kitchen scissors. I don't even know why, but it felt wonderful afterwards. Happy can't even describe it. Euphoric. It's messy and uneven but it feels better than it ever did.

You changed your hair; my mother says as if I didn't know it was shorter. She yells out the name she calls me, but I don't listen. It's not me she's calling to. *It looked nicer before.* She says.

I disagree.

This time when I head into the club, there is no one commenting on my figure, nor youth or my hair. There's a feeling in the air, lingering more than the recycled smoke. I lean against the wall of the toilets that stink of cleaning chemicals. Alex is here again. I smile at them as they walk in, my teeth chattering from the cold.

You seem like you're freezing. You okay?

I nod. They smile and offer me some new lipstick. It's black like coal. An interesting choice. *You can try some, I thought you might like the colour.*

They watch as I stand in the mirror and apply it, as they drape their coat over me.

The world seems to stop in place. I touch my reflection, and I can feel my eyes well. I've probably had too much to drink. Have I?

Can you see it now?

People like us have always been this way. We've just got to make the world see what we see.

A part of me doesn't care what the world sees. I can finally see myself in the mirror.

What's your name? They ask.

'I'm James.' I say. I love the way my name sounds. My name.

Finally, it's a reflection of who I am on the inside.