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Mirror, Mirror

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Author Bio

Larry Sneeringer says, "A relationship between two people, just like a sequence of words, is ambiguous if it is open to different interpretations. And if two people do have differing views about their relationship—I don't just mean about its state, I mean about its very nature—then that difference can affect the entire course of their lives." - Elliot Perlman

Mirror, Mirror

For a while I had been dreaming of a love as sugary, as sweet, as unhealthy as a caramel apple. I never thought you would have gone off with the Peterson kids to play chubby bunny in the Jewish cemetery though now I know it was an idea birthed from spiked apple cider. Tiptoeing across the floorboards in the hall, I imagined how I would find you. I imagined it vividly—the infinite plush pillows, the thick feather down-comforter draped over your slender figure, the sheets flowing underneath it all with their fresh coolness and your coco-butter, perfume-like scent. Beneath the moon, beneath the stars, beneath the silk canopy over your throne there was to be a sleeping beauty, a princess with “visions of sugar-plums dancing in her head.” But you were not there. Through the shadows only an indentation of you, a frozen silhouette, remained in the mattress. Academics had not been demoted in priority. It’s just that all the final exams, the term papers, the language labs were over, and you were celebrating your last night with us...although without any of us at first.

Standing in the bedroom that had been designated yours I expected to find you like I had all the other nights conscious somnambulism lured me out into the hall. Better than a glass of warm milk did the slumbering sight of you put me back into the dream world, but that night, Halloween night, the night before your flight back to Siena, you weren’t there. So in the spirit of your departure, in the spirit of the ghostly electricity that circled the cool air coming through the open windows, I gathered household garments, mainly those that had been used for pretend in the toy chest, and quickly masqueraded into none other than Peter Pan. Although by the time I found you, after trudging through dewy fields of corn stalks, prickly ravished pumpkin patches, and the toilet-paper-strewn front lawns of Halloween after-parties, I was more hideous, amphibious, and green—like the creature from the Black Lagoon.

I should have known to discover you as a princess, a princess of enchanted sorts with a wand dangling from your hip, glittery makeup heavily though appropriately applied for your regality. The short blue dress you wore was simple, but elegant. It fitted you perfectly because in all reality you were a princess—a princess who had come from a far away land to feast with us, to study in our country, and to preside with our family.

What were you saying to Devin when I finally found you? I don’t remember what it was, but it was loud and nonsensical and intoxicated. In your newfound natural setting you presided with the neighborhood boys who reeked of muscle and ill intent. I was thirteen then. Deep in your gingerbread skin you had brought the Mediterranean sun carrying it on your back right to our doorstep. Like a praying mantis you were all arms and legs with strange, graceful movements bending your knees and folding your elbows. You enjoyed your occasional glass of vintage California white wine with that evasive smoky taste you so sought after, and our parents, along with us, enjoyed your company and the dinners we shared. They said you would go onto Julliard and do something extraordinary with your life, but on that Halloween night where things are always strange and out of place, it seemed that their words were fiction.

It’s not fair to say you were piss drunk, because you weren’t, but the concoction of whatever Devin had presented to you dizzied your behavior if ever that’s putting it mildly. You were screaming. You were screaming through the goopy marshmallows slobbering from your mouth and the tears converging at the corners of your eyes frightened by your own diluted mental state at the time. Imagine that—you could barely take a single step forward

and then the next day and happily ever after you were six thousand miles away. Though they hissed and belched fire at me, the jabbering blow of a thirteen-year-old boy taking you into the night was more than the guys with you could have expected. I gave you water. Even in your saddest moments the only knight I could be was one in tinfoil with rounded intentions bringing you a cup of tea or offering you an embrace. Do you remember any of it? Is it all coming back or did you leave those memories here?

Your sniffing and the clanking of high heels on macadam were the only sounds left to mask the silence. Never had either of us seen anything so surreal prowling the empty streets lost in the night of All Hallows Eve. I didn't know what to say or do for you. Drifting along the pavement like ghosts we crossed by the lattice window work of English-styled homes and their neatly trimmed hedges. A plague of hiccups made me all the more ridiculous with my costume that had become slimed and green. It was more like a croaking, a fit of inexplicable coughing that had originated somewhere upstairs near the time of your arrival. How could it not have considering all that had spilled out from your bedroom? Seeping into the hallway there had been a potion of hair spray, the sweet scent of olives, lingerie, the hard pronunciation of the Italian "c," straw from a broom, whispers in a mysterious language as if you were casting a spell.

Black was a shade I thought I never see you in; I didn't think it suited you. Yet the alcohol surged through your head, spinning it and your decisions, and when we finally reached your throne again you carelessly undressed. Terrified I watched as shadow slowly slithered across the tight skin of your stomach in between the black of lace or silk all curvaceous and wispy like your dark hair, all so very strange.

Later Devin would tell me that the best, most dreamlike experiences are followed by the worst of hangovers. We never found out if that was the case with you for the next morning you had, of course, made yourself disappear. Only that full moon night with you had harried Devin with appetite and made him howl and bark and carry on. I am ashamed to call him a brother. Before the falling of your eyelids, when the stars burnt out, and the next morning came with blinding sunlight, I am sure that the coco-butter, tangerine scent of your skin stained the inside of my head.

It's a funny thing the ever-ongoing vendetta between perception and reality. What do you do when you wake up in the morning and your own body rejects you? In the mirror it grimaces back at you with a ridiculous, matted hairstyle and a lifeless expression. A capillary in your eye bursts and reddens. Your whole body says to go back to the place the previous night you made for dreams and now make it a grave. You want to obey, you really do, but you know you have to push through the bathroom door, to the bedroom door, the door leading to your office cubicle, then to the door of a counselors office, a door through a passing face you neglect to acknowledge, through a box of tissues, a freezer-burnt TV dinner, the shower, and then, hey, back to your nest of sheets and pillows.

What about you? Do you push on the door and does the door push back? Does the door say, "fuck you," and in that instant make you appear pathetic, silly, incapable? Do the darting eyes sweep over you like their hands that never will? You probably don't mind. You couldn't have minded for some time now. The door says stay. Do you have trouble pushing open other doors now? I've closed several while opening others. I've opened the door to a Spanish classroom. I've pushed it opened violently. All the lectures and online grammar exercises couldn't make me master your third language or use it like you did as an enchanted tongue. Is it a coincidence that the Spanish word for man (*hombre*) differs by one vowel from their word for hunger (*hambre*)?

Well, I am still hungry even with the garlic, the veal, the white wine in front of us. It spills out between her and I along with the candelabra and assorted red rose arrange-

ment. I'm taking all that I've learned about princesses and the essence of women and applying it here now. The chilled salad fork is neglected, and a chug of wine masks my garlic breath. Everything is so careful and coordinated from the teaspoon of flirting to the staring, darting, fluttering, sprinkling of the eyes over one another. She's peeling away my first layer, but she will never ever reach the layers that really reveal me. I wonder if she sees through my costume like you did all those years ago. Did you peer straight through me? Did you feel the gridded texture of my shirt, my ribs underneath? I should be concentrating on what it is she's saying. Instead I'm imagining her and I on distant beaches together. My familiarity with her is synonymous with her boyfriend's, which, is to say, unambiguously minimal. She is a deep-sea treasure of pearls and gems—a mermaid sitting across from me but he knows none of it. He doesn't even know we're out to dinner together. When he finds her again they will pick up where they last left off perhaps in an argument or a kiss.

Still, the night is a ticking bomb, or at least I'm hoping it is. I want something to explode by the end. After all the meticulous tinkering to get the two of us here I almost hope drawbridges are lowered and a little red carpet unfolds to invite us to be romance's guests. How romantic have I become with my kings and queens? How misinformed? That little window in the time before or after her menstrual cycle, whenever it is, in accomplice with the emission of pheromones and other lies brewed something not so grand, but a date. So here I am with this woman, this middle-aged, overworked, under-appreciated woman in this restaurant pulled straight from the back of a postcard. But I am just a boy and behind the echoing laughter in this place there are, although rusted, men in impenetrable armor. Where is Neverland? It is the final question that will consume my thoughts for the remainder of this evening. Surely Sienna is not it because after all you ventured across the sea. Beauty catapulted you across the Atlantic. It brought you on a white horse and took you back on a broom. You said you always wanted to find love but your crowning romance is a book of blank pages. This is how I imagine it anyway. Behind the spinach pesto before me, cold and green, I wonder about you now. Do you still find the first snows of winter breathtaking? Do you drive alone in parking lots late at night? Or is that me? Does Italy even allow for such nocturnal activities?

Questions like this distract me. They are as distracting as the inappropriate notions the red roses in front of us stir. The scarlet petals, the protruding thorns – they prevent me from really being able to see the face in front of me. Arching and bending my neck I grow frustrated through dessert right up to the presentation of the bill. We are leaving. For dramatic effect to rustle the city slickers, to bend the candlelight away from me, I swing my pea coat around my back as if it were a cape and I dashing, charming, chivalrous. Outside the snow is a trickle. It is barely a snow with none of that ideal, fluffy, powdery white. Since then everything has faded to black and now I find myself here, with her, in the dark.

“Go back to sleep,” I tell her. I pet the top of her head and give her all the textbook caresses she must be yearning for. I follow something formulaic that *Men's Health* must have classified somewhere and the response one will get for administering such a prescription. I get response 4A. No, it's 7D. I can't tell. Here in the dark I cannot differentiate between the satin sheets, her hair, or my hand in front of me. There is clarity in one thing alone. It comes in a green light through the open window—an emerald light emanating from the aurora borealis, or perhaps a nearby swamp, or the first surreal moments of All Saints Day. Yes, it is the ambiguous transition from All Hallows Eve to All Saints Day and apparently it comes in a haunting green light. Can I not help but think back to that night so many years ago? If your body never succumbed to sleep and the night never fell victim to morning would you have kept tilting the bottle back? Rising from the bed I am confronted with my mirror reflection basked in the lime light. And after all this time a fit of hiccupping continues. Rib-bet.