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Mirror, Mirror

The monster is back.

Its arms hover. Its hands grip the harsh edge of the pearly scallop-shell sink. Hairy tentacles, waiting to make their move. I flinch, sucking in, or choking on, nothing but a lack of air. “Why are you back?”

But it doesn’t listen. In a way, it never listens to me. Or at least, to what I have to say.

I want it to leave. I always do. I always know I do. But I don’t know that, deep in the recesses of the junkyard that is my mind, a little of me doesn’t want it to leave. I just barely sense it.

This monster disgusts me. Even without looking I can feel it and I want to claw it away. I want to be an animal, *to* it. An unnatural animal, but an animal all the same. And I sense that’s exactly what this monster is too.

I won’t make eye contact with this monster. I tell myself not to. So I don’t scream, don’t cry, don’t run away terrified. Because I’ve already called out for help, ever the classic defective-damsel-in-distress, but nobody I run screaming to can ever unscramble the scene. They never understand. Never. So I don’t look, even though I know that every time it visits I can’t avert my eyes for long, even though the second I look it will grasp me in its fist for longer and longer each time, squeezing all the sweat and tears and blood and fears out of me before abandoning me, leaving me lying all alone in the puddle that used to be me, that in a far-off world used to be beautiful. And a part of what’s still me wants the monster to come back, because I don’t want to be all alone. So I let it all soak back into myself even though I also don’t want to. I’ve come to hate ‘alsos.’ And the monster continues feeding on me, even though it knows it can’t survive for too much longer like that. Because if it takes too much, we’ll both vanish into the steam rising from my bathroom shower to cloud away everything and everyone else.

“Go away.” My voice is little more than the ripple of a grain of sand thrown into the deepest, bluest sea, and yet when I repeat those two agonizingly simple words again and again and again, it’s like I’m hollering into my own ears—but mine only. The longer I look upon this thing hovering in front of me, the quicker my gaze becomes flame, a spark that first must catch before burning.

And then some sort of noise resonates through me, an alien, animal growl, and yet also, somehow, so human. Maybe this is the unbearable sound of the ember in my eyes, in my mind. And the ember digs in, little tentacles searing my skin, digging trenches in my soul to make thick, inky, trembling shadows to cower in. It encircles my stomach like a scaleless snake and I can feel how badly it wants to pull tight. And sparks begin to pool in my eyelids, threatening a white-hot flood to wash away my sin and my strength and my self. The rain starts, and all I want to do is scream heavy metal in it, or fall with it, but I don’t. I stare down, down, down, into the void. Three times is never a charm, but I try anyway. “Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye...”

But I lose the battle. Again. Its invisible third fist locks around my dripping face, pulls it straight into the trap of its jagged gaze. Fighting fire with fire only spawns a fiercer blaze, and who am I to deny the truth? Our sparks collide and send bone-crushing fireworks throughout my body. I want to scream more than ever before. The disgust. The disgust is just too much. And my monster senses it. My monster *is* it.

Ugliness is such a hard word to define. But here, it is not a word. Here, it is a *thing*. A thing that reeks of blood-matted fur and rivers of acid. I look into my monster’s face and all I see, all I am, is ugliness. Ugliness, that thing that stretches and tears at the corners of your mind, that flattens your skull in on itself, that heaves your stomach up and plasters it onto the back lining of your throat until you can’t breathe. That thing that draws blood.

And I can’t breathe, as the smoke enshrouds me, as the blaze itself forces my mind to bow as it blinds me until only one sight is left. Because my monster is so ugly.

She is ugliness.

And I don’t think I can take it anymore. Who knew how dark-red a flame could get.

The fire burns and burns, licking every inch of my skin and penetrating deeper as I relish the pain, because I must, somehow, deserve it. The blaze builds and builds until it consumes me completely, and I am lost in amniotic

fluid, gone back to the very beginning, nothing in my mind but a sense of sense. And that's when we are all, finally, crushed.

The blaze is gone. Ashes rain down on my tongue and they taste terrifyingly sweet. What a delicacy. But is a dish a delicacy if you eat it all the time? I have so many questions trapped inside my skull, fighting for attention like spoiled children, pulling on the back of my mind and never letting go. Why won't she leave? Why can't she leave?

Not because she won't, but because she can't.

My eyes trace a searing silhouette around her. Buttery, soft curves where smooth, sleek flatness should be. A gingerbread woman made of raw sourdough; she leaves a bitter, stinging taste on my shriveled tongue. Shrunken lines drawn by a toddler where glowing, cosmic semicircles should be. A definition of the way geometry is not meant to work; some anti-mathematician calculated her proportions all wrong. The ashes fall more quickly now, piling up around me, relishing the stinging kiss of my magnified scars. I know, sooner or later, once they reach the top, I'm going to choke. I'm going to suffocate, just because someone or something incredibly cruel has sewn my pupils to the ugliness that stands here. Why do I have to keep looking back at this reflection?

I don't know the answer, but I sense it. Three times is always a curse.

Because me, because me, because me.

Me.

Two letters that represent the greatest, ugliest monster of all. Not even the mirror can fully capture what I see, what I feel, what I know. Not even the mirror can fully mirror ugliness, mirror what makes all these rivers of tears constantly flow and chart new courses. But today, but now, I have moved beyond rivers and into seas. I know what it is to sing in the ocean as I am washed away by a world's worth of liquid riches. My tears drown me and I make no effort to resurface. Because I am a monster. Because I do not deserve to walk among the people. Because I am just too hideous a creature for them to have to see each and every day. Because somewhere in my mind I am too kind to them, but never kind enough to me. Because ugliness does not deserve anything.

And so I turn back from the cobwebbed caverns of my mind to the bathroom mirror.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?"

It makes no reply and a laugh bubbles out of me like blood out of a dying girl's mouth. I haven't laughed in so long.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the ugliest of them all?"

Still no response. Suddenly seized by icy fingers, I try one more time.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the worst of them all?"

And finally, I reply.