

Mirror Image

By Lena Coakley

If only there were no mirrors, Alice sometimes thought, although she carried one in her backpack wherever she went. It was a silver-plated mirror her father had given her with the initials ACS on the back. Just you, Alice, she would say to herself, looking the way you've always looked. Then she'd pull out the mirror. The surprise and disbelief at seeing the reflection was a joke she played on herself over and over.

It was disquieting, however, to come upon a mirror without warning. She would say "excuse me" to her own reflection in shop windows. Mirrors in unexpected places would make her start and lose her nerve. She avoided the girls' bathroom altogether. Alice took to wearing sunglasses all the time, to remind herself, to keep something constantly in front of her eyes that would remind her that she looked different. Her teachers let her wear them. Maybe the word had come down from the top that she wasn't to be hassled for a while, but Alice thought it was more than that. She thought they were all a little afraid of her.

Of course her mind learned to ignore the glasses. The human mind is incredibly adaptable. Her mother was always telling her that.

"Do you think I move differently?" she asked her twin, Jenny, once identical. "Look how my feet kind of roll when I walk. And my hips, my hips feel totally different." Alice walked across the bedroom like a fashion model, wearing nothing but black bikini underwear. "Actually, as bodies go, this one is a lot better. I mean, check it out," Alice grabbed a chunk of her thigh, "no cellulite."

Jenny watched from inside her own body. "You looked okay before."

"Sorry, I didn't mean You're pretty. I can see that now. But I never used to think that I was. You know, my old body used to weigh much less than this body weighs but I still wouldn't have been able to walk around naked in it. No one has ever told me that this body is ugly. For all I know it's never had zits. I haven't had one yet. I feel like I could do anything in this body. Hey, did I show you, I can almost touch my foot to the back of my head."

Alice had to re-learn how to move in the hospital, and to speak. At first the world was nothing but a mush of dark images, disconnected voices and prickly feelings all over her skin. If someone touched her arm she wasn't sure from which part of her body the sensation came. Colours seemed different. People's voices were pitched a tone higher. When she tried to speak she bit her tongue, which seemed enormous in her mouth and tasted funny. When she finally learned, the tone was different, but the inflections and the slight Maritime accent were the same. She'd had an accident, they said. But long before the psychiatrist told her, she knew. These weren't her hands. This wasn't her breath.

"Let me read your diary."

Alice and Jenny lay on top of their beds supposedly doing homework. Above each bed hung a charcoal portrait their father had drawn. He had finished them just before he died. Now, only Jenny's was a good likeness.

“Not now,” said Jenny, closing the book and capping her ball point pen.

“You can read mine.”

“I know what your diary says—Ooh, I found a new mole today on my new body. Ooh, don’t my new armpits smell divine?” “Come on. What do you have, some big secret in there? We’ve always read each other’s diaries.”

“I have to get to know you better.” Jenny slipped her diary between her mattress and box spring.

“Yeah, right,” Alice laughed. Then she realized her sister wasn’t joking. “What, fourteen years wasn’t enough?”

“You were in the hospital a long time, that’s all I mean.”

Alice swung her legs over the side of her bed and looked at Jenny. At one time looking at her was like looking in the mirror, and Alice still found her sister’s coppery red hair and masses of freckles more familiar than her own reflection. “Jenny, we’re still twins. I have the same memories: Camp Wasaga, moving to Toronto Dad. You know, when I draw I can still make the shadows, just the way he showed us. Isn’t that amazing? Even though I have a different hand. And my signature is the same too. This is me in here, Jenny. My brain is me.”

Jenny rolled over on her bed. “Whatever. You still can’t read it.”

Alice was in the hospital for months. She saw doctors, interns, psychiatrists, physical therapists, speech therapists. Once a reporter, who had actually scaled the building, poked his head through the window to ask, “Hey, Alice, how do you feel?” and snapped a few photos.

All the mirrors had been removed, of course, from her room and bathroom, but Jenny and her mother brought the hand mirror with her initials when the doctors thought Alice was ready.

“They couldn’t have saved your old body,” her mother said. “This was the only way to keep you alive.”

“No one knows what it will be like,” said Jenny. “You’re the only one who’s ever survived before.”

“I know all that,” Alice slurred. The doctors had taken the precaution of giving her a mild sedative. It made her feel like everything was happening to someone else, far away. She held the silver mirror in one hand. With the other, she pulled at her face, squeezed it as if it were clay. Alice was mesmerized by the unfamiliar eyes, big and brown and dark. Whenever her father painted her he’d spend most of his time on the eyes. The eyes are the mirror of the soul, he used to say. Whose soul is that? Alice wondered. For a moment she considered screaming, but it was too much trouble. Besides, it wouldn’t be her scream.

“It’s okay, Mom,” she said. “Maybe I’ll start looking like myself again. If I try hard enough. If I concentrate hard enough. Very slowly, over the course of years, my eyes will change colour... my face. It might...”

Alice's mother stroked her hair. "We'll get through this," she said, "the human mind is incredibly adaptable."

"Mrs. Jarred's on TV again," Alice called.

"Turn it off," her mother said, "it's time for birthday cake," but Alice and Jenny kept watching. Above the television, the faces of the family portrait Alice's father had painted smiled out into the room.

"A new development in the story of Girl X," said the newscaster, "first surviving recipient of a brain transplant..."

Alice's mother stood in the doorway wiping her hands on a tea towel. She had fewer freckles than Jenny, and the long braid which hung down her back wasn't quite so bright a red, but the family resemblance was unmistakable. "I don't want you to worry about the Jarreds, girls. My lawyer says they don't have a legal leg to stand on."

Mrs. Jarred, a middle-aged woman in a red checked coat, stood on a suburban lawn. She had dark hair just beginning to gray and Alice's large, dark eyes. A short man with a pot belly smiled self-consciously beside her.

"Is that your family?" Jenny asked.

"I don't even know them."

"Mrs. Jarred," said a female reporter with a microphone, "has science gone too far?"

"She's our daughter," the woman replied with emotion. "When we signed the release form donating her body, we didn't know they were going to bring her back to life with some new brain. Our Gail is alive and living somewhere in Toronto and I'm not even allowed to see her." Mrs. Jarred began to cry and the camera cut away to Alice and her mother leaving the hospital amid crowds of journalists. Since she was under eighteen, Alice's face was covered with a round, black dot. The girls had both seen this footage many times before.

"Gail. Wow. That's so weird."

"That's not my name."

The TV flashed pictures of the Jarreds before the accident. A girl with a dog. A smiling teenager wearing a party dress.

"Ooh, nice outfit, Gail."

"Damn those TV people," said Alice's mother. "They protect our privacy by not showing what you look like, and then they show pictures of your body before the accident. That makes a lot of sense."

"The Jarreds probably gave permission," said Alice. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. Everyone at school knows. The whole world knows."

Alice's mother continued as if she was talking to herself. "Those Jarreds... If we start having reporters all over the lawn again..." She twisted her face in disgust, strode across the room, and turned off the television with a sharp flick of her wrist.

"Hey."

"Come on, cake time. I made it from scratch. Alice's favourite, chocolate with mocha cream."

In the dining room a huge and elaborate cake was waiting on the table. Rich, white chocolate piping swirled over dark mocha. Ornate candy violets decorated the cake's tall sides.

"Awesome, Mom," said Alice. She couldn't remember her mother ever making a home-made cake before. "You blow first," she said to Jenny as she sat down. "You're the oldest."

"By two minutes," said Jenny, "and anyway, maybe I'm not the oldest anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"You might be older than me now with your new body. You might be old enough to drive for all we know."

Alice's brown eyes widened. "Mom, if my body is sixteen, does that mean I can get my license?"

"Forget it," her mother said as she lit the cake. "You could barely walk six months ago." She switched out the lights.

In the yellow glow of the candles Alice and Jenny followed a tradition that their father had started long ago. First Alice and her mother sang Happy Birthday to Jenny. Then, after Jenny had blown them out, the candles were lit again for Alice, and the song was sung a second time.

Alice blinked and squinted when the lights came on again. "I forgot to make a wish," she said.

Her mother smiled and handed a slice of the beautiful cake to each of the girls. "I guess you have to share your wish with Jenny."

Alice and Jenny laughed. One year, when they were little girls, the suggestion that they would have to share a wish sent them into fits of crying which their parents could only resolve by fitting the cake slices back into the cake and lighting the candles for a third and fourth time.

Alice cut the cake with the edge of her fork, happy that the tension brought on by the newscast had begun to melt away. She put a large bite into her mouth. Bitter. Alice tried hard to swallow, tried hard not to let her face show any reaction to the cake, but the taste of the mocha forced her mouth into a grimace. Jenny didn't miss it.

"I guess Gail doesn't like chocolate with mocha cream."

"No, it's good," said Alice, forcing it down.

Jenny pushed her own piece away. "I'm not hungry."

"Jeez, Jenny, why are you angry at me for not liking a piece of cake? I can't help it."

“Who’s angry?”

“I have different taste buds now, and they’re sending different messages to my brain. They’re saying, this cake tastes gross. Sorry Mom.”

“Okay,” said Jenny. “You’re always saying that you are still you because you have the same brain, but who is to say that your whole personality is in your head?”

“Where else would it be?”

“I don’t know; maybe there was some other part of your body where part of your self lived. Maybe it was your big toe.”

Alice’s mother set down her fork. “Jenny, people have their big toes cut off and they’re still themselves. People have heart transplants and they’re still themselves.”

“Right,” said Alice. She smiled at her mother, but her mother looked away.

“Maybe not,” Jenny said, “maybe they’re a little bit different but they just don’t notice. You’re a lot different. You’re a morning person. You never see your old friends. You hang out with Imogen Smith and those snobs. Now you’re going out for cheerleading, for goodness sake. And what is with those sunglasses? Sometimes...I don’t know... Sometimes I think my sister is dead.” Jenny pushed her chair back and ran out of the room.

Alice sat where she was, poking at her cake with her fork, trying not to cry.

Her mother got up and began to gather the plates. “I think,” she began, her voice wavering, “I think cheerleading would be very good for your coordination.”

Alice stared at her mother, but again her mother avoided her eyes. Suddenly Alice thought she understood the elaborate cake. She made it because she felt guilty, Alice thought, guilty for thinking, way down deep, that I’m not really the same daughter she knew before.

The first thing Alice saw when her eyes could focus was the white hospital ceiling, but the white had a slightly unnatural blueness to it, the way white looks on TV. Sometimes things were exquisitely clear and sharp, although she wasn’t wearing her contacts, and she hadn’t yet learned to ignore her eyelashes which seemed longer and darker than they had been before. When Alice saw her mother for the first time she cried and cried. Her skin had a different texture. Her hair hardly seemed red at all. She even had a different smell. And Jenny. Why was everyone she knew so different? Why wasn’t her father there? Would he be different too?

When Alice met Mr. Jarred, it was in the middle of the street. A new sidewalk had just been poured on Bedford Avenue, so Alice had to walk in the street to go around the construction on the way home from school. A light rain was falling, preventing the concrete from setting. Mr. Jarred held an oversized umbrella, striped red and yellow, above his head. He might have walked right by her, but Alice was staring hard at him trying to remember something—anything—about him besides the newscast.

"Gail," he said in a soft mumble and then, "I'm sorry... I mean Alice...Do you know me?"

"I saw you on TV."

"Ah, yes." The two stood in silence for a moment.

"You should have an umbrella," he said. "This one's a ridiculous thing, my wife's. Here."

"No, no, it's just sprinkling, really," but Alice took the umbrella Mr. Jarred offered her, holding it upside down, its point in the road.

"This is very strange for me, very strange," he said, staring at her. "We knew you were in Toronto, but, well, to be honest, it was my wife who wanted to contact you. I...I thought it would be better not to see you. It's very strange," he repeated, then added, "You look so different."

"I do?"

"Your hair. The way you stand, even. Our Gail, she was an early bloomer, always slouched. Your accent is different too." He paused. "I understand, you know. My wife, she thinks our daughter is still alive, but I...I know." A car turned onto the street and honked at them. "I'd better go."

On impulse, Alice grabbed Mr. Jarred's hand. It was warm and big and rough and Alice knew she had never felt it before. "I knew I wouldn't remember you," she said, "but I was hoping, when you walked by, that I'd know you somehow."

Mr. Jarred took his hand away. "But you don't."

"No." Alice slid her dark glasses to the top of her head. "My dad—I guess you know he died in the accident."

"Yes."

"Sometimes I think if he were alive, he would just look into my eyes and know who was in here." The two stood in silence. Then Alice said, "What will you tell your wife?"

"I'll tell her," Mr. Jarred's voice began to falter, but he looked at her straight on, "I'll tell her I looked into your eyes and that I didn't see my daughter."

"I'm sorry," said Alice. She didn't ask the question that immediately came to her, but the words rang in her mind: who did you see?

Alice gripped the umbrella as she watched Mr. Jarred hurry around the corner. She stepped up to the curb and pressed her waist to the wooden barrier that protected the sidewalk. Then she folded the umbrella and secured the strap. In a small corner of the sidewalk she wrote her initials, ACS, with the tip of the umbrella.

Alice was here, she thought. And then she walked towards home.