

BY MEENAKSHI CHATTERJEE ('00 PHY-EEE)

The Looking Glass

Mirabilis lives alone. Deserted by her husband, left by her ambitious son and with a senile mother in an asylum, she lives with memories, in a society that has no family unity. Her dignity is her last reserve of strength. She would have passed her days, sitting in a bench in Manakim Park, chatting about inconsequential things with Mrs. Johnson, had she not bought the Looking Glass. However, what did she see in it?

Mirabilis Meredith started licking. Her grandmother had given her the name. Her mom was never good at child-raising and it was because of her grandma that she grew up to into herself. Now she was forty-seven. She stayed at the blue house in the corner of Mienie Street, all by herself. Her husband had forsaken her and her son was away at the university earning a graduate degree. Mirabilis bore the pains that life inflicted upon her with immense stoicism. Her estrangement, her only son's departure, her sequestered life-all had blown over her while she stood firm like the rock. Only recently were things being different.

It had all started a week back. Mirabilis was returning after an invigorating walk from Manakim Park in the evening when she chanced upon the man. Not a man really, a tramp. She noticed him because of his steadfastly piercing look at her. Mirabilis was discomfited-naturally. She would not be stared at. Mirabilis made no bones to hide her displeasure. Fuming with indignation within, she started walking towards the offender. When she was almost in front of him, her fortitude faltered.

The tramp hadn't taken his eyes off her. He was really ugly. It

appeared as if God had used a hammer instead of a chisel to carve his features. She was wondering how to upbraid him when the silence between them was abruptly shattered.

"How much for the mirror?"

"What?" Mirabilis was too surprised to believe her ears.

"You heard me. How much?" The tramp was least perturbed.

"I will not be addressed to like this and why will I buy a mirror from you anyway?" She was amazed at the man's barefaced audacity.

"You will."

His terse reply left her baffled. How was the man so sure?

"Show me your stupid mirror and let me decide." She had nothing to lose after all.

"Can't. You can only see it after you possess it. It's special."

The tramp paused for sometime before continuing.

"Let's fix the price at seventy-seven cents. You can't get it cheaper than this. What say?"

It was true. Nothing today came at the price of cents. The mirror must be really useless or perhaps

cracked - Mirabilis thought to herself. She agreed. Come to think of it now, she wondered what drove her to buy it in the first place. She had never done anything so thoughtless before.

The coins exchanged hands. The tramp counted them one by one while Mirabilis stood waiting. Satisfied that he hadn't been cheated, he took out a rectangular object wrapped in a tardy brown paper. The sides were torn and it was a wonder how the thing was in one piece.

"Here you are."

"Now listen carefully to what I have to... No! Don't open it!"

Mirabilis' hands were arrested in midair by the loud shriek of the tramp. She had been trying to get the thing out.

"I told you its special." He glowered at her for disobedience.

"Open it when you reach home. Not before that. The mirror isn't ordinary." He took a deep breath before proceeding.

"When you are alone and thinking of people whom you haven't seen for ages, whose faces are just a blur in your mind, look into this mirror. Think of the person you want to see, and the mirror will hold up

the face of that person as it is on that day. If there is only darkness that meets your eye, then be sure that the person is dead. Never will the mirror show you your face. There are other mirrors to take care of that.”

Mirabilis was still holding the package when he disappeared.

It had been a week since that encounter. She had managed to throw the brown paper package at a corner of her room without giving it a second thought. Today was her birthday and there had been no one to wish her. Her son had forgotten yet again. Her mom was senile and barely aware of herself to be able to wish Mirabilis. Her husband wouldn't remember her, leave alone her birthday! She had no caring neighbors. In short, she felt her loneliness acutely today. It was then that she saw the mirror.

Mirabilis Meredith started licking her lips. Whenever she was excited, she did it almost unconsciously. It had been an embarrassment to her husband and son but she couldn't help it.

Her hands were trembling when the paper came out and fell on the floor. She looked eagerly at the mirror. What a disappointment! The mirror she held was no different from the one on her table. Very common. She was about to dismiss the tramp's words as stories of a demented mind when she noticed something peculiar. She couldn't see her face even though the mirror was at level with it. Mirabilis moved it up and down, sideways and even turned it over. Still no face. Maybe the tramp wasn't blabbering after all. She decided to check for herself.

“Let me think of my mom.”

Mirabilis had been to her mom only yesterday, and so she knew exactly how she looked. She couldn't think of anybody else to prove the veracity of the tramp's claims. She shut her eyes tight and opened it too quickly to peer into the mirror.

A most astounding thing happened. Hazes seem to clear from the mirror's surface. A light illuminated the mirror from within. It was as if a bulb was lighted inside. Then her mother's visage floated up! It was wrinkled and pale. The poor woman looked very ill. Mirabilis felt a pang of guilt at having sent her to the asylum. Maybe she ought to visit her again. She was still looking at her mother's frailness when it hit her.

“The tramp had been right! My God! I can see faces! What an extraordinary thing this is!”

“Whom do I want to see now? She mused.

“Of course, Ron!” It had been close to six years since she last saw her son.

She again squinted at the mirror to get a glimpse of her only child.

The same swirling haze and the sudden eruption of light occurred before her son's face floated up. He had put on weight. Maybe he had taken up drinking. The eyes were puffy and he had developed a second chin. Her son looked so much like his father. He was looking at her with a vacant expression.

“Ron, it's me, your mom. Can you hear me, dear?”

Only silence ensued. His eyes kept blinking.

Mirabilis let out a sigh. She had expected too much out of seventy-seven cents! It was a mirror after all and not a telephone!

“What about grandma?” Her grandmother had been dead a decade ago. Mirabilis wanted to see the darkness the tramp had talked about. She was still judging his statements.

This time the light blinked once and then went off. The mirror was enveloped in inscrutable darkness. “Is death equivalent to darkness,” she questioned. “I am thinking too much,” she chided herself. Her grandma was dead and the mirror was dark and both indicated to only one thing. The tramp had been right.

“Wouldn't I love to see my husband now? I wonder if he still keeps his mistress.”

Mirabilis looked immediately in the mirror and there was a countenance squinting at her. She couldn't recognize it. It was repulsive. The hair had thinned and stuck at the head in clumps. Gray fuzz covered the chin in a most unbecoming fashion. The head seemed disproportionately large for the skeletal torso. His features had blunted in a way that reminded you of hammer strikes. Only the eyes were limpid and as piercing as ever.

With a shock Mirabilis realized that her husband and the tramp looked uncannily similar! No! They were one and the same!

“Oh my God! My husband a tramp!” The shock almost bowled her over. No, I must be wrong.

Gregor had been handsome in his youth, one of the reasons why Mirabilis had chosen him over other eligible suitors. Her grandma had gifted them a fortune in their wedding. Mirabilis often blamed Gregor of marrying her for her money. Initially he had denied. Later he stopped refuting her incessant accusations. Things became worse when rumors of his affair surfaced. Mirabilis Meredith was a woman of honor and adultery was a sin she would never forgive. Gregor disappeared one day -- never to return. Until now.

“Why didn’t you come to me at least once, dear?” His sorry and pale face made her forget the sorrow that he had given her. She was ready to forgive and forget. “I will let bygones be bygones. Come to me. I need you. Come to me.”

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Lost

...in every which way

This October in Delhi on my way to Faridabad,
Looking for directions in the dark,
I who had progressed from buses to cars with drivers at that...
We knew we were lost!
I didn't know how badly I was too,
And learnt that at a terrible cost...
As the driver halted abruptly,
A cyclist behind us bumped the car and fell off,
He was obviously badly hurt,
In a split second-
No fighting, no threatening, just dusted away the dirt,
Just picked up his cycle and rode away-
I could have helped him, apprised him of his rights
But fear for my child and myself made me hesitate
It sure was dark-
And he didn't wait,
He who was also somebody's child.
My hesitation left me feeling shallow and defiled.
Anger I would have understood, I carry so much of it myself,
But...
the mute acceptance of a spirit that had died.
The driver said, “Shall we proceed”, looked through the rear view mirror,
Questioningly at the wreck who sat in the chauffeur driven car and cried.

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Mirabilis shut her eyes as tears poured down. She saw herself cooped up for days in her house with not a soul to talk to, with no one to share her food with, with nobody to shower her love on. She cut a sorry picture in her own mind. Without realizing, she opened her eyes and looked into the mirror. It was too late before she remembered the tramp's words. Never will the mirror show you your face. There are other mirrors to take care of that.

Mirabilis shrieked impulsively as darkness enveloped the mirror's surface. Immediately she became aware of her surroundings. People were staring at her. Mrs. Johnson looked disturbed.

“Is everything fine, dear?” Her voice was trembling.

Mirabilis couldn't answer. She wasn't aware of the fact that her imagination was so fertile. The children had stopped playing to get a look at what was going on. Mirabilis was still in Manakim Park.

She got up to leave.

“I am... not feeling well. Excuse me.”

She left hurriedly. I must see the doctor. Get a grip on yourself. She rebuked herself. She never noticed when she had turned the bend. She was jolted when her eyes met the steady piercing gaze of the ugly looking man. The tramp.

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