

the shadow of perfection

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You wake up this morning and roll over to find a beautiful man lying asleep next to you. You decide it must be a dream, and roll over to find out what happens next. But you're awake. You are definitely, completely awake.

Your hand flies to your forehead. What is this? What happened last night? Were you drugged? Was he drugged? He snores lightly, completely unaware of your blinding consciousness.

You look around. You are not at home. The room is completely white, and the morning sun floods the skylights in large square beams. This is not your room. This is not your bed. It is softer, more luxurious; the blanket, warmer, all encompassing. You don't want to leave it, but you must.

You get up, rubbing your eyes. Your glasses are nowhere. You can't see. You stumble along the most likely path to a bathroom. En suite. You pee. Your glasses are on the sink. Thankful, you put them on and look down at your flat, perfect belly and too-perky-for-your-age breasts.

What?

You stare down at your naked body, wondering where the triple-XL fat rolls and the neglected hairy legs went. They were there yesterday. Yesterday!

Your hands grab at your stomach, unable to grasp or pinch or pull any of the familiar girth. It's gone. You feel your ribs for the first time in your life. You've woken up with the body you always wanted, with a man you didn't know, in an apartment that wasn't your own.

“Hello, you,” the man says, standing in the doorway. “You’re up.”

He has a British accent. You look up. He has short, dark hair and a couple of days’ growth of a beard. He is nude, perfectly muscled, perfectly proportioned. You cover your body with your hands and arms.

“Sorry,” he says. “I’ll wait for you to finish.”

“Okay,” you say, trying to sound normal.

He leaves. Should you be embarrassed? You wipe, flush, and wash your hands. You dare not look in the mirror, not knowing whose face you’d see.

You hesitate. There are no clothes. You pick up a heavy, soft towel and examine it. Could it fit? You wrap it around your body. It covers you completely. You marvel at it. Your body! In a towel. This towel wrap would be nothing to an average woman, yet you have never been average sized. You wrap your arms around your own waist and it is tiny – small as a model’s.

You walk out to the bedroom where the man is reclining on the bed.

“You’re wondering what happened,” he says, a hint of a laugh in his voice.

“This can’t be real,” you decide aloud.

“I assure you, it’s real,” he says. “Look.”

He gets up and leads you to a living room with a white sofa and table. Instead of a television, the dominant focus of the room is a wall of mirrors. One floor-to-ceiling mirror takes center stage, and then, salon-style, framed mirrors of every shape and size hang from the crown molding all the way to the floor boards. You see multiple reflections from the corner of your eye, but somehow, you can’t look up. You can’t bear to see it –

Yourself.

He notices your averted eyes.

“It’s okay,” he says. “Look. Enjoy it.”

You don’t want to look.

He folds his arms across his chest and says, “On the count of three, you’re going to look in the large mirror. One, two, three.”

Your head snaps up involuntarily. You see your face for the first time. Your facial features are familiar, but not yours. Your skin is

clear for the first time since prepubescence. The mole under your chin is gone. Your lips are fuller. You notice that your hair is no longer frizzy, but fashionably layered and long. Chocolate brown, not strawberry blond. You are your fantasy, come to life. Overnight, you appear to have lost nearly two-hundred pounds, your hair has grown out a minimum of three inches, and your eyes peer out at an unfamiliar person who can be no one else but you.

She is the person you gave up trying to be about a decade ago. You knew she was unrealistic.

“How?” you say, unable to drag your eyes away.

“It’s a bit like magic, isn’t it?” he says, coming up behind you. His body presses against yours. He is warm. You don’t resist. You don’t want to.

“Magic,” you say.

“A bit like that,” he replies.

You ask, “Are you serious?”

“This is what I do,” he says. “I let people see themselves as they wish they could be.”

You look at his reflection in the mirror, his dark features, his slight scruff, his muscled arms circling what you know is your body, but not your body.

“Why?”

He smiles.

“You wanted to be this person, this reflection, since you were a girl. You wanted to be like the movie stars with the long, shiny hair, and the lithe body. You wanted to have perfect breasts. You wanted beautiful lips. You wanted legs you’d never have to shave, clear skin, and a heart-shaped bottom. Why question it?”

Your eyes meet in the mirror.

He steps back; you let the towel drop. You don’t know who he is, but suddenly you are indifferent to modesty.

He comes close again and places a hand on each of your shoulders. His touch feels electric.

“You said magic. But how do you...”

He smirks.

He says, “It’s like magic. It’s really more like a... power I have. When I change a person, the exterior is ... sort of painted on.”

“Like ... makeup?” you say.

“Yeah, sort of. Perhaps more like face paint. It’s temporary, right? Face paint wears off. You sweat, it runs. You wipe, it smears. You wash, it rinses away. It doesn’t last. It’s only perfect for a day – sometimes less, honestly. As soon as you rub your eyes –”

“I did that!” you interrupt him. “I rubbed my eyes!”

He peers at your face, mouth in an appraising frown.

“Ah! So you have!” He puts the arm of your glasses in his mouth, and runs his thumbs in a tender circular pattern over your eyelids. Your eyes tense; your stomach drops. Your knees might collapse from pleasure. His touch makes your loins ache. Your mouth hangs open. You groan involuntarily.

He stops abruptly. You open your eyes. You have 20/20 vision.

“I’d wondered why you’d need these things,” he said, tossing your glasses onto the table. “But you see how it works. As soon as you shower, wash your hands, wash your face, brush your teeth – it just goes away.”

Where before there was a blur, you now see the smallest details. You look at your hands. You’d washed them in the bathroom. Your skin is dry, your nails uneven. The hands look like the hard-working hands of a forty-five year old, lonely woman. He takes your hands in his, one at a time, massaging each digit into a soft, long, and delicate finger. Again, your stomach lightens and drops; you cannot trust your knees.

“Amazing, yes?” he says. “But as you can see, temperamental.”

“But couldn’t you just fix it as it wears off?” you ask, hoping this will not be the last time he touches you.

“I could,” he says, “if you were staying here.”

You think of your cat and your apartment. You think of your job, driving the city bus. Would you have to get a different job to explain this sudden change? Perhaps you could get a better job. What about your sister and your mother – would they even recognize you? Your few friends – you hardly see them. You could replace them with more interesting, attractive people.

“Could I bring my cat?” you ask.

He laughs.

“What’s so funny?”

“I didn’t invite you,” he says. “It was hypothetical.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know,” he says. “It’s all very confusing. You’re not the first to assume you could stay.”

You dart back to the largest mirror, heart racing, your hands touching reflected hands. How could you give her up when you’ve only just gotten her?

Your breathing becomes harder. Your eyes well with tears. Your vision blurs again.

“Oh, see? Don’t cry. You’ll mess up your face,” he says. A handkerchief appears out of nowhere. You press it into your eyes.

“You see what I mean, don’t you?” he says. “You can’t stay this way. Not if you want to be human.”

You sob into the handkerchief. You are losing her. How can you stop it? How can you keep her?

“I’ll do anything,” you promise.

You can feel him looking at your bowed head. You worry that your face has changed its shape, returned to its normal self. You worry he’ll catch you being you.

Not me, you think. You cannot dream of returning. You panic. You clutch at your chest. Breathing becomes even harder. You cannot catch your breath. You suck in air, but it doesn’t satisfy. You wheeze. You choke. You wheeze again.

“Asthma?” he asks. You nod, terrified. There is no inhaler anywhere in the room. Your heart is going to explode. Your lungs are going to fail. He comes forward, puts his mouth on yours and forces air into your lungs, his own breath. Your breathing calms immediately. He pulls back and watches you suck gulps of air into your perfectly functioning lungs. You have never had such immediate relief.

“I’m Marlowe,” he says. His eyes concerned, his lips tugged down. “If you’re going to stay, you should know who you’re proposing to live with.”

Your hand goes to your mouth, willing your sobs to remain unvoiced, this time from relief. You breathe deeply and gratitude courses through you.

“But, sorry,” he says. “No cats.”

Life with Marlowe is a sudden change – completely different from your former existence. First of all, neither of you ever wears clothes. And you never leave. There’s no need. You are endlessly amused by sitting on the couch in front of the wall of mirrors. You stare at yourself. You fantasize. You spend time with Marlowe. Lots of lovely time with Marlowe.

The first night you were there, you made love with Marlowe. He stood behind you as you admired yourself for what seemed like hours. How you could stand and stare for so long is a mystery, but you could not tear your eyes away from the mirror. When finally he came to your side and took your hand in his, you turned to him and kissed him, suddenly eager to use your new body. You wanted him with a ferocity you could not explain, and curiously enough, he wanted you, too.

Marlowe is an excellent lover, not that you’ve had many. But unlike the others, he makes hungry where most he satisfies. You remember reading that somewhere, but you’d never experienced it until now. You fall in love with him, but the real devotion is saved for the mirror. You turn yourself on. You stare at your figure. You sit still as a statue, until Marlowe kisses you, making you warm.

Day or night, after you make love, you fall asleep curled beside him, legs intertwined, his arms holding you together where his power has worn off. His magic makes you sleep deeply as he retouches the damaged areas, before you know there’s a problem. He wants your body intact. He doesn’t let you shower.

“How did you discover that you had powers?” you ask Marlowe one day.

Marlowe smiles and shakes his head.

“Can’t tell that tale, I’m afraid,” he says. “It’s against the rules.”

“What rules?” you ask.

You are standing in front of the mirror brushing your hair – a daily ritual. It is so soft, so long, so luxurious. You brush one hundred strokes before you lose count. When you stop, you make striking faces at yourself, posing in a number of ways to see how stunning you can be. Marlowe starts to kiss you again, before you remember you had asked a question. It’s fuzzy now. What was it?

“Oh,” you remember. “Rules.”

You start to lose control, the way you always do when he touches you. He is irresistible.

But you pull yourself together and retreat from his embrace. You see something in his eyes. Something dangerous. But he squares his shoulders and pretends indifference.

“What?” he asks.

“What are the rules?” you ask.

He sighs.

“Rule number one,” Marlowe says, “you cannot question the power I have. It simply is. That is all.”

You look him up and down. He seems tense for the first time.

“All right, Marlowe,” you say, suddenly sorry you asked. “I’ll just be grateful.”

“That’s my darling girl,” he says, coming back to envelop you again.

Before he claims another kiss, you blurt, “Are there other rules?”

You wonder how these things never came up before. His lips tighten and you feel his muscles contract against your body.

Finally, he says, “If you want the illusion to last, then, yes. Just one more.”

You look over his shoulder into the mirror. Your mouth waters looking at the two of you together. Such beauty exists nowhere else on earth, you think.

“The only other rule is that you cannot interact with your old life, unless you want to go back to it. So no contact with the outside.”

You look at him. You look at you. You swell with desire for him and you become filled with confidence.

“Who needs the outside?” You whisper, “We are perfect.”

You stare at the mirror together until your hunger for each other takes over. You forget all about questioning him. For a while.

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One day, you realize that you don’t remember what you looked like before you woke up in Marlowe’s life. Your beautiful self has become so much of a familiar sight that even the typical wear and tear, which Marlowe fixes immediately, seems like a non-issue. You haven’t seen your real body for so long that you honestly believe you are no longer her, that other woman. Did you dream

her? The fat one? The one who was alone and ugly? The one who, so predictably, had a cat?

No. You know one thing – the cat was real. You wonder what happened to Apple, your short-haired Abyssinian cat. You wonder for the first time how long it's been since someone fed her. And what about your mother and sister? Were they worried about you? Did they try to call? What did they think happened to you?

"Marlowe?" He appears behind you instantly, never more than a breath away.

"You called?"

"Marlowe," you falter, confused by the questions rolling around in your head. You do not want to upset him. You want to know, but you don't know how to ask.

Finally, you blurt out, "Marlowe, do you know what's going on out there?"

He squints as if in thought.

"Out there..." he says. "Out where?"

"In the world." You struggle for words. "Am I... missing?"

His eyes lower, as if he had been waiting for this question for some time.

"Technically, you don't exist," he says. He moves in to kiss you. This is how he distracts you. He is the temptation that never ceases to tempt.

Except today, you had a cold, piercing thought – what if you really don't exist? At all. Are you dead or alive? Is this heaven or hell? Did Marlowe save you or damn you? You can't answer these questions, but for the first time, you want to.

You pull back.

"I mean, her," you say. "The one I was. Is she missing? In the world, is she?"

He hovers over your face, his jaw clenched in a silent debate.

"Did I dream that? That I was once fat and ugly and all alone?"

"Aren't you happy here?" he asks.

"You know I am," you say. "I don't know if you can understand. You have everything you want. You snap your fingers and it's there. Whatever you imagine, it's yours."

"And yours," he says quietly. "Have I ever denied you anything?"

You think hard, and know that he hasn't. Except one thing.

"I have a cat named Apple," you say. "I've had her since she was born."

"Yes," he says.

"You said, 'No cats.'"

"So I did." Marlowe sighs, his breath sweet on your face. "Don't you remember the rules?"

You are afraid. You have never heard his voice sound like this. The rules: Do not question his power. This line of questioning has nothing to do with his power. Right? What else? Do not interact with your former life. You aren't trying to make contact. You just want to know what happened to that former life. Is that the same thing as "interacting"?

Marlowe has been so good to you, so kind. You have loved him; he has loved you. He has never hurt you. He wouldn't punish you for asking a simple question, for wanting to know. If he did, it would mean all of this was a lie – your life together, your love. You had to be stronger than that. Your love could withstand knowing.

It had to.

"Marlowe, where is my cat?"

Resignation and a little sadness creep into his face.

"Your mother has her."

"My mom is allergic to cats."

"People are sentimental," he says. "It's all she has left of you, so she makes do."

"Why?"

"Don't ask this of me," he says. "It will come to no good."

"Marlowe, please!" you insist.

He looks at you for a long time. Such penetrating eyes. You stare at him and feel as though you are slipping into a hypnotic state. Just before you feel yourself sliding away, something inside you wells up, and you shudder, returning to your senses.

"Well?"

"Fine," he says. "You are presumed dead."

"Presumed..." your voice fails. It takes a long time to presume someone is dead, legally. Without a body, no one can prove it.

"How is that possible? How long have I been here?"

“Don’t do this,” he begs. “Once you’ve done this, there’s no going back.”

“Going back?” you ask. “Was that other life even real? I can barely remember who I was.”

He shakes his head.

“Seven years,” he says. “You’ve been here seven years.”

“Years?” You cry, “Seven years?”

You search your memory wondering how seven years have passed in such a brief time. Your hair has not grown at all. You haven’t even had a period. You couldn’t even have been here a month.

Seven years? Impossible.

“You don’t believe me.”

You shake your head, because you cannot believe it. Marlowe leads you, like a child, to the large mirror. You look at your perfection and feel the familiar surge of warmth for yourself and your body. You smile and wonder what you’d been asking about. You can’t remember. All you feel is love.

“I love you,” you say.

He steps back and snaps his fingers.

Your skin falls heavily into mounds of flesh, yanking your belly out full around your middle. The stretch marks are angry and red against patchy skin. Your hair, strawberry and electrified, hangs to your knees, obscuring your down covered thighs and enormous behind. You are larger than you were before you came to live with Marlowe, the unending supply of food and no restrictive clothing allowing for ample increase, though you never saw it. Your lips are thin under a slight mustache, and the mole under your now-double chin has darkened to an alarming color.

The woman you see in the mirror screams and pushes her hands all over her body, as if she were trying to contain it. You realize as you hurt yourself with the squeezing that it’s you who is screaming, you who is bruising your flesh, trying to enclose it within an invisible container. And then, as you move, you start to smell it – the stench of not showering for seven long years. The sweat, the sex, the urine, the shit, the mustiness of an age meets your nose and you become nauseated, and suddenly start to lose your breath.

Your lungs cannot handle the weight of your body. It feels like you are running a marathon, though you stand in one place.

“Marlowe!” you scream. “Marlowe, what’s happened to me?”

“This is you,” he says calmly. “The real you. Don’t be so surprised.”

“Marlowe,” your breath is coming in gasps. “Marlowe, help.”

You fall to your knees, the muscles unable to support your weight. Pain shoots through your legs and back. Your body, moments ago, was weightless and light, and the sudden heaviness feels as though gravity has increased a hundredfold. Your lungs have no strength to work against the mounds of flesh. You know what is happening. Asthma takes a hold of you. You try to calm your breathing, but it’s no use.

You fall on your side, your arms reaching out to Marlowe.

He kneels, puts his face in yours.

“You couldn’t stand to be this,” he says. “But you were wrong. Beauty is in the flaws. It isn’t about perfection. Even the masters know this. And yet, I gave you everything. Whatever you felt would somehow perfect your life. See where it leads?”

Your mind races, pictures flashing. What he said doesn’t make sense. In your mind, you see Marlowe, generous and kind. Massaging you back into perfection. Marlowe, making love to you as if you were the only woman who could satisfy him. Marlowe, his eyes watching, waiting, wondering. Would today be the day? Marlowe, providing the very air you breathe.

But not now. Why not now?

Your search for perfection didn’t lead to this heap on the floor. Questioning him did.

Marlowe takes your hand and massages one finger into flawlessness, leaving the rest of your body a deformed heap. He holds your hand in front of your eyes.

“This is the shadow of perfection,” he says. “It didn’t improve upon your life. It took it away.”

You try to speak. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. No words come out. Please, Marlowe.

He grimaces. Then he’s gone.

You strain to search for him, your breathing getting worse. You cannot speak, but your mouth forms the words, I wanted to know.