

## ABOUT THE MIRROR AND ITS PIECES

I was warmer when forgetting me was the way you broke my heart.

Green silk, white lace, red velvet at Christmas. My mother dressed me like a gift, wrapped me in bows, and set me out on the porch for you to find. Every fine dress I owned I wore, one after the other, waiting for you to come. I'm sure there must have been nights where you arrived on time because otherwise why would she have kept doing it? But I only know that I would sit on the steps, my tiny legs tucked under my skirts, wearing pretty toddler shoes that didn't quite fit, nothing to do but watch the cars drive past. Modesto doesn't freeze at night but by the time she decided I could come back inside I was usually stiff from sitting still, shivering, and up past my bedtime.

Waiting in the dark on the porch for a father who wasn't going to show.

It doesn't matter. You don't remember that, and neither do I. I only have the stories that my mother told me, and the vague sensation of cold concrete.

There were family reunions a couple of times a year. We'd drive through the night to get down to Sunnyvale, Acton, Venice Beach. Grandparents and aunts and cousins dressed in bright colors, my mother looking beautiful. She was always beautiful when she was happy. I watched her smiling, laughing, from my hiding spots. Under the table.

“Where's the weird girl?”

On the top stair.

“Who knows. She talks too fast anyway.”

Behind the door of an unused bedroom.

“Her hands are cold. She touched me when we were playing tag and it was creepy.”

A little girl can always find a way to be alone when no one is looking for her.

When I was eight I saw you again. Unexpectedly, without a word in my direction, I was bundled into another delicate dress and put into the car. By that age I was firmly into jeans and button down shirts, dirt-smudged sneakers and climbing into the big tree in the backyard. Dresses were for holidays and funerals but I owned one deemed “good enough”.

I had new sisters then, a trio of blond babies chasing after you. You were busy with one thing or another, something besides me. Your new wife entertained me instead. She fed me strawberry ice cream and tried to get me to smile, and I meant to, I really did, but the ice cream was cold and you didn't notice that I was there. The chill of it turned my mouth to snow. It slipped down my throat and into my belly and you walked right past the kitchen and...

You called me “dear” when I left.

“We'll see you soon, dear,” and “Say goodbye to your sisters, dear,” as if I'd get a chance to know them. As if I'd be invited back to your house next week for more ice cream, instead of waiting for you to remember me again. Year and years of waiting.

“What did you do?” my mother asked, a few months later. “Why doesn't anyone want you?”

I opened my mouth to answer but she'd already turned away. None of the words I meant to say formed into sounds. They fell out as wisps of frosty air instead. I said her name and watched it disappear as my breath warmed up to room

temperature invisibility again.

That summer we went to the lake like we always did. The sun beat itself against the water sharply, cutting back across the sides of the house boat, flashing across my mother and her friends. I sat with my feet dangling over the edge, toes making tiny waves as the boat moved slowly along. The water felt wet but not cold, not any colder than I already was.

I didn't notice the sun baking me bright red.

"How are you the only person in our family who doesn't tan?" my mother asked as she smeared aloe across my shoulders. We'd gone into the cabin, out of the sun. "Stay inside and read a book or something. You can't go back in the water this weekend." She sighed, her breath hot on my back. "Does it hurt?"

I shook my head, the ends of my hair catching in the thick goo smeared on my skin. She sighed again, pulling the strands out and twisting my hair up into a pony tail.

"Try not to move much. I'll come check on you in a few hours." She stood, frowning. "I think you're actually getting paler. You really need to get outside more often."

I thought of all the time I spent outside already. I made a list to tell her about— playground swings, backyard tree, reading books on the couch on the front porch in the afternoon— until the splashing and laughing reminded me she'd already gone.

I just now realized that you never called me by my name.

We went to the mountains for a vacation one winter.

"I'm tired of dragging you around," she said. "You never want to have any fun. You can just play outside and be

miserable by yourself.” I had never seen snow in a quantity greater than the sometimes frost that turned the grass white in January so I watched out the window as the ground rose and the fields gave way to mountains. Green became speckled with white, then covered by it. The dirt and trash and everything got covered up by a blanket of perfection.

Inside the A-frame cabin, owned by other friends of hers, there was a fireplace and I remember the sound of ice tinkling against glass while someone told jokes and everyone laughed. I don't know who. Someone's husband or boyfriend— I could never keep track of all my mother's friends. Too warm in there and too crowded and no one would notice me slipping out through the sliding glass door, so I did.

The night was quiet, empty, and cool. I laid in the snow and watched the stars come out, blossoming in the darkness. When the moon rose the yard lit up, reflecting the moonlight like a million tiny shards of mirror.

It turns out that snow is beautiful.

Did you know that?

When I was sixteen, you came for me. One day I was in school and you were there, in the back of the class. The teacher introduced you to the class, and until that moment I hadn't realized who you were. You told my mother later that everyone mistook you for my boyfriend. I don't know how they could have, you were three times my age.

In your head that was better, I guess, than being my father.

We sat on the couch, the three of us, my parents and I, watching television as if this was a thing we did every night. Your hand rested on my leg, under the blankets, and I didn't

think much of it then. It was a small spot of warmth on skin gone cold years ago. It was the gentle touch of someone who should have been there for me all along.

It was comfortable. For a moment I felt safe.

It was a mistake not to see that you would take it as permission. It didn't occur to me at the time.

"My own daughter's getting hot for me," you said in the car as we drove, us two, up to Oregon where you were living at the time. I looked out the window as the highway took me farther from home.

"You have great breasts," you'd said. "Like baseballs. My mother had breasts like yours."

I didn't know what any of it meant, so I rolled down the glass and let the cold air wash over me.

"Come here," you said, dragging my by the wrist toward the bedroom as if it were a casual request and not an order enforced by your insistence and the foot of height you had over me. And, later, whispered, sometime in the middle of it all, "What else are darling daughters for?"

I didn't answer.

I don't know.

I bit my lip to keep from screaming, closed my eyes against the sight of you, and buried myself in the snow inside my chest to keep from feeling anything at all. I was trapped there, you said. Unwanted, you said. Things had changed and I had better get used to it. What choice did I have?

But that was a lie too. You were done with me in a week and sent me back home to my mother.

"Have you seen your report card?" she asked me the following winter. "You're failing PE, won't participate. Cs and

D everywhere else, won't participate. Won't talk in class." She pulled her cardigan closed, shivering against a chill I didn't notice. "You need to keep your bedroom windows closed. You'll freeze to death in here." I nodded and slid the glass nearest to me shut.

"You're so pale. And could you at least pretend to smile? If you fail out of school and you're miserable all of the time, no one is going to want you. You're not staying here forever, do you hear me?"

I opened the window again when she'd gone.

Eventually there wasn't a place for me in my mother's house anymore. I went back to the mountains, tried college, and made it through a year before my reputation grew loud enough that even I could hear it. "That girl doesn't say no," the boys said. "If you just pull her into bed she won't say anything at all."

Can't argue against a rumor when it's true.

I sat on a bench outside of some class or another, sitting for hours as the sun set and the temperature dropped and no one asked me what was wrong. Students walked by, going with some purpose to the next place they had to be. The cafeteria, and then the library, closed behind me. The distant sounds of normal campus life faded into silence.

By morning I had moved on to somewhere new.

When I was twenty-four I called you on the phone. The plastic chilled as I pushed the buttons, one number after another, dialing your new wife's house. Not the one from when I was a child, the one that would come after, who was only a decade older than me. I don't know why I did it, and as I sat listening to your drug-addled voice telling me how you'd

been to the dentist that day and by the way, what did I want? My voice froze completely. I breathed out tiny flakes of ice instead of words and eventually you hung up.

Eventually I couldn't stay in California any more. The fake smile on my lips hurt, cracking my cheeks open on the inside, and no one understood why I was always cold. They would crawl into bed with me for my beauty, find a way to warm themselves under the sheets, and crawl back out again complaining of my frozen hands, frozen feet. Frozen heart.

Too many to remember. What does it matter, anyway?

In the summer months, when the temperature shot up, the heat made me sick. Sun hot, oven hot, drying dying desert hot air pressed against my skin and the ice in my veins pressed back. I couldn't live that way.

I moved East instead, and when I found that the depth of winter wasn't cold enough to soothe my skin and settle my stomach, I moved again, further North. Looking for the right amount of ice.

These days I live in a place where it snows every day, so no one notices how cold I am. We all wear thick jackets, woolly gloves, knitted scarves twined round and round our necks. When I breathe out frozen wisps of air, so does everyone else. I don't stand out here.

No one notices that it snows when I cry. I do cry, still, slow teardrops dripping down my cheeks, or great howling sobs racking my chest. You'd think I wouldn't by now but this ache never goes away. My voice carries out into the world as the howl of a storm. If life were any kind of fair there would be at least one person who cared that I hurt so much...

No one asks what's wrong with me, and that is better, I

think, than having to pretend that nothing's broken, nothing's lost. I see people each time I leave my home but I don't think they see me. We walk past each other in the city square, swaddled against the chill, smiling without looking at each other, really. Between the snow and my skin and silence I wonder— if I dressed all in white would anyone notice me at all?

Some days I think that if I had a child, I would be warm again. A little laughing voice to fill the rooms of my house. A warm body snuggled under blankets with me, books of brightly colored stories, little ice skates, little boots. He could play outside in the snow and when he got cold he would come into the kitchen and I would make him hot chocolate and dry him with a fluffy towel and he would be warm again. I'd name him Kay, or Kai, or one of those happy, sunny names. Or something solid, like Edmund, so he'd be sure to stay by my side, instead of blowing away on the winter wind.

I'll know him when I see him. I'll name him then.

Of course I would have a son. I'd have to.

I wouldn't know what to do with a daughter.