

Mirror Stage by Terri Mullholland

An Inkslinger's Observance – Reflection (2024)

You take a final bow before the curtain falls.

Still smiling, you pick up a bunch of white roses someone has thrown at your feet. Too late, you realise the stems are a mass of thorns, and your smile fades as pinpricks of blood appear on your hand.

When you are on stage, you sometimes forget you are real.

In the dressing room, you tense as you moisten cotton wool to take off your make-up, your beautiful mask. First the base, then the lips. You always do the eyes last, keeping them closed until the last minute.

When you open them, the mirror reveals Other You.

You turn away from the glass to change, not wanting to acknowledge Other You's presence, not wanting to show fear.

Other You is watching. You can feel their scornful eyes, cold and razor-sharp on your back.

Other You has never approved of your stage self.

Not that you need their permission to transform yourself into someone else, but you still find yourself hoping for their admiration.

You will never get it. Other You is like you in black and white, your negative.

Other You would never wear this beautiful fuchsia silk dress, these fabulous fake eyelashes. They prefer to blend into the background, unnoticed and unobserved. Nobody has ever recognised you off stage.

You are spending less and less time as Other You. It started about a month ago when you were in a hurry and left in full make-up and costume. You had the time of your life on the way home, made that train carriage come alive. You've never had so many admirers fawning over you. Holding onto the bar in the centre of the carriage, you twirled around, watching your reflection flickering between darkness and light.

Other You was furious. When you finally took off your wig and make-up before bed that night, their angry face spat at you in the mirror: *Who do you think you are?*

Other You is frowning at you now. You can see the mirror out of the corner of your eye. They won't be happy until you have removed every last scrap of your stage self; until they are back in charge. Even then, they continue to sneer at you. *You think you're so much better now, but you are nothing without me.*

'You're jealous,' you tell Other You. 'You can't cope with me being the one everyone loves. The one who gets flowers and applause.'

Why would I be jealous? says Other You. *When you're such an inferior version of me.*

'I'm the version you wish you could be, and one day it will only be me.'

So you like to think. You know you can't leave me. Just try and see what happens to you.

'The usual hollow threats,' you say. You try to make your voice strong, but it quivers on the last word.

Other You repeats it in a mock-quiver falsetto. *Threats, threats, threats.*

You dip your hand into the open tub of face cream on the dressing table, industrial sized, for taking off stage faces, and slap a handful of cream onto the mirror, rubbing a big white smear over Other You's face with the heel of your hand, grinding it in, obliterating their image in the glass.

There are speckles of blood in the cream from where the thorns pierced your skin.

'That'll shut you up for a while,' you say.

Or try to, but the cream is thick and cloying in your throat, and you're gagging, struggling to breathe. You try to wipe away the cream, to spit it out, but your hand touches only glass.