

FANTASY

Mirror מורוּמ

By Bill Allen

“So, how was school today?” my mother asks as we pull into our driveway.

“Fine,” I reply.

“Anything fun happen?”

“No.”

She parks, gets my wheelchair out of the trunk, and sets it up outside. I open my door and prop my arm against the car seat to push myself out into the chair, only to come down a little too hard and crash into it.

“Whoa now, let me give you a hand!” Mom blurts out.

“No, I’m fine. Don’t worry.” I reposition myself in the chair to straighten myself out. “I can do this by myself.”

Mom lets out a sigh, and we turn to make our way up to the house. She fumbles with her keys a bit but eventually gets the door open, and lets me wheel past into the foyer.

“So, got any plans for the rest of the day?” Mom asks as we undo our shoes.

“The answer is still no, Mom. It’s been no everyday since the accident, and it will stay no until some miracle fixes my nerve damage,” I grumble. She asks this same question every day, as if anything could ever change.

“I just thought that maybe you could go out, maybe hang out at the park out back with your friends,” she says.

I glare at her. “And do what exactly? Sit there and watch them run around?”

Mom shrinks back a bit, and I breathe out a sigh. I don't intend to come off as angry so often, but it's never easy to fight it.

"Can you just hand me my cards please?" I mumble.

"Of course," she mutters. Reaching over to the foyer shelf, she pulls out my deck and hands them to me.

"I'll be in my room," I say, slipping the cards into my pocket and quickly wheeling myself around to head off through our tiny house. I roll through the whole first floor, past the kitchen and living room, and then pivot my chair to the right and stare up the staircase.

"All right. Here goes nothing."

I pull myself over to the handrailing and lift myself out of my chair. I lean on the railing heavily, transferring my weight as I struggle to get my crippled legs to make the step up each stair. I make it about four steps up, only to slip, and send myself crashing back down to the bottom in a roll.

"Carrie! Are you alright!?" Mom yells as she rushes into sight, only to find me lying breathlessly on the floor. She quickly bends over and picks me up, making sure I'm all right, then goes to carry me up the stairs.

I hate this more than anything. I know Mom means well, but I feel patronized. Even simple things like the staircase are too much for me to handle.

We reach the top, and Mom sets me down on the spare wheelchair we keep upstairs. She makes her way back down and turning back to face me, looks up as I gaze down at her.

"Carrie, I know you try, and I love that about you, but please, just please don't lie to yourself."

My anger swells. I want so desperately to say something back. I want to tell her to shut up, or to not talk to me like that. Don't lie to

myself? About what? I spend everyday living with these stupid legs. How could I possibly lie to myself?

I don't need to say anything, though; my gaze must convey itself well enough to her. Without making eye contact, she quietly whispers, "Sorry. I didn't mean it that way..." before I withdraw, pivoting myself and wheeling my way past her bedroom down to mine, swiftly opening it, rolling in, and slamming it shut behind me. I'll talk to her later once I've had the chance to calm down.

I look around, my anger dissipating as fast as deep breathing can make it. Everything is still here. My bed, my desk, my window, my mirror.

"Yep. Nothing changed at all," I mutter, before wheeling over to the window to look outside. I peer out, just barely managing to see while still sitting in the wheelchair. I can see the park. I see John, Penny, and Gina messing around, kicking a soccer ball about and laughing.

I don't even understand why I do this everyday. It's always the same. I look out the window, and I see my friends doing something I can't.

I turn from the window, slipping my cards out of their case as my gaze is drawn naturally to the poster on the backside of my door.

That poster was my escape. I've had it since I was seven; it's a depiction of my favorite stage actor, a woman who went by the name Gambelle. I used to watch her on television, and she always found a way to impress, regardless of the odds stacked against her. She'd do card tricks, magic shows, even stunts. I especially loved the ones involving trampolines. Watching her fly around the stage was always so magical!

I fiddle with my cards, lost in the memories. I fold them and shuffle them; the cards were the only trick of hers I could figure out how to feasibly do on my own. I close my eyes for a second, imagining what it must be like to be her. All the tricks, all the opportunities. I sigh happily. That must be the life.

*I warp my face, stretching it out
and putting on a big, fake smile,
and the reflection does the same.*

And then my eyes open, back to my dreary, forever unchanging room.

“Ah, this lovely little cage of mine,” I mumble before turning from the poster and rolling over to my desk. I place my cards down, and reach over to my journal, pulling it towards me. I flip it open. My last entry had been approximately three months ago, when I had successfully managed to get up the staircase on my own. I haven’t been able to replicate that “stunt” since. I groan, because as I am, I can’t do anything.

“God, I just wish for once that I could go back to how things were.... I wish I didn’t have to deal with these useless legs.” I shake my head. As if that was possible. All I can do is card tricks. I turn myself around and make my way towards my bed. I figure a nap probably wouldn’t be terrible right now. It’s not like there’s anything else going on.

I cross my room, passing by my mirror, but something catches my eye, and I back up to check if I was just seeing things.

I wasn’t. I turn myself, wide eyed in confusion and shock, as I stare up at my mirror. I can see myself, but it’s not a reflection. It has my face, but is dressed in bright red, and is standing tall on both legs.

I look back to my poster. It’s a dead ringer. Whatever this image is, it’s me, dressed up like her. The red jacket, the top hat, the showman attire.

Completely baffled, I raise my arm. The reflection does the same. I warp my face, stretching it out and putting on a big, fake smile, and the reflection does the same. It's me—it has to be. But how?

I look down. My legs are as bruised up as ever; the fall from the stairs definitely did a number on them. I reach down, trying to move one of them, only for pain to shoot through me as I attempt to lift it. I look back up, longing for what the reflection had. I reach out for the mirror, and following suit, the image does the same. This can't be real, can it? How can this possibly be me? Our gazes meet, our actions mirror, but we are so starkly different.

And then our hands meet, pressed firm against the glass of the mirror, and everything goes dark. My mind races. What happened!? My eyes flutter open after a few brief moments, and everything feels...different. There's something underneath me.

Mystified, I look down and stumble backwards as I realize what changed, only to then catch myself with my legs before falling over. I'm standing. On both my legs. I regain composure and try to squat. My knees bend and I lower myself down, then straighten myself back up. I can stay balanced. I wiggle my toes. Each and every one of them leaps to action; I can distinctly feel each of them from the others. I look around. There isn't a single wheelchair in sight.

I take a step forward. My foot lands, admittedly not too gracefully, but it lands nonetheless.

I hear some noises coming from off in the distance. It sounds like... people? Like a lot of people, and the voices are interspersed with laughter. I take a step towards the voices, and then hear the faint humming of music growing alongside them. I step, and then I step again, and soon enough I'm running! I can't believe it. I, with no wheelchair in sight, am running!

And then I burst out through a tent flap and am met with an onslaught of bright, colourful lights and overwhelming amounts of noise from everywhere. My eyes adjust, and as everything becomes clearer, I realize where I am. I'm at a circus! I see food stalls, tents, fireworks in the distance, and most of all, I see people, happily walking around and enjoying the festivities.

I stand there in utter awe. None of this makes any sense, but it's all such a rush! There are no more limitations...no more dusty old room or wheelchair!

Lost in the moment, I bolt through the park grounds, and while admittedly I'm not the most graceful runner, I'm too desperate to take everything in to care. I see games with larger-than-life prizes, and people leaping to and from trapezes and flipping off trampolines! It's like an entire world based off those old shows I watched!

Everything is so foreign, yet somehow familiar. Every corner of this wonderland seems to hide something amazing, something I've never seen anywhere outside of my television, and the most exciting thing is that I'm a part of it—I can live out all my dreams here, not as an outcast, but as a magician, someone free from limitations!

Then, a deep voice erupts over the crowds through a loudspeaker. "Come one, come all, to Wonderland's Rarest! Take a gander at rarities and oddities the likes of which none have ever seen!"

Curious, I can't help but follow the loudspeaker back to a tent from which people are coming and going. I smile. I already love this entire place! I step through the entrance.

And then everything is silent. Confused, I look around. Everyone, the entirety of the crowd I entered the tent with, has disappeared. I am alone.

“What? How could...” I start to say, only to cut myself off as I look further into the tent. Lining the walls are human-sized glass cases with displays inside featuring strange-looking people. I walk up to a display slowly, and gazing up at it, I stumble back and fall over. Inside is John, running in place, just like how he was on the field earlier, but there is one thing distinctly different about him. He has a soccer ball for a head and is running in place, going nowhere but happily refusing to stay still. He doesn’t acknowledge me; his gaze is firmly planted straight ahead. I knock on the glass trying to get his attention, but fail to even make him flinch.

Entirely confounded, I shift my gaze to the other displays. I see Gina and Penny amongst them, both in similar forms to John, running in place with soccer ball heads, but it isn’t just them. I can see my teachers, my mom’s friends, and then, even stranger, Gambelle herself. But she isn’t in some strange form like the others; in fact, she isn’t even moving. She just stands there, her body a life-sized porcelain doll, perfectly posed and dressed to look exactly like my poster, but without the expression or character.

And then a voice rings out, piercing the silence occupying the tent, chanting my name sombrely. “Carrie... Carrie... Carrie...” Concerned, yet desperate to find someone, anyone at all, I follow the voice, and after winding down hallway after hallway of displays, I finally burst out into an open room with only one display. My jaw drops, partly out of confusion, but mostly out of shock.

I see my mother, trapped in a glass case, but she isn’t herself. She is also a puppet, suspended entirely by strings. She is relatively small, but possesses four arms, each hand holding a different object. Most of them hold common household items, but I zero in on only one: the one holding a wheelchair.

I look around, but see nothing else in the room besides her. Then, I look back to her, only to jump in shock. She is staring right at me, her gaze locked with mine.

“Hello Carrie. How was your day?” she asks, not a single emotion occupying her voice.

“Uh...” I sputter out.

“How was your day?” she asks again.

I stare at her in confusion, not knowing what to say. What the hell is this thing?

“Do you need a hand?” she asks, emphasizing the hand with the wheelchair in it.

“N-no... No, I think I’m fine...” I respond, struggling to meet its unflinching and unblinking gaze. “I was just, uh... wondering if you maybe knew where all the people went? There were crowds outside...”

“They went home.”

“Home? But they were all just here. How could they have gone home?”

“They went home,” she repeats, not registering my question.

“Uh... yeah... of course.” I peer around, hoping to see if there’s another doorway to go through. I spot an exit on the other side of the room, and without a word, slowly begin making my way towards it, not taking my gaze off the puppet as it rotates to maintain eye contact.

“Carrie.”

“Yes?” I respond, working my way towards the exit slowly.

“Don’t lie to yourself.”

My eyes go wide. If I wasn't so confused, I'd be angry; I can feel boiling in my chest. I take a deep breath as I stare into her soulless eyes. This thing doesn't even seem to register how I'm reacting. It just keeps staring.

"Don't lie to yourself," she repeats. I keep moving towards the exit.

Just as I get to it and break eye contact to leave, I hear the puppet behind me.

"Don't lie to your..." she begins saying before I dash off and exit the room, trying to get away as quickly as possible. I can hear her close behind, repeating the statement over and over in that same, cold voice. *Don't lie to yourself. Don't lie to yourself. Don't lie to yourself.*

Eventually, as I keep running, her voice trails off until I can't hear it, and I finally stop, nearly falling as I bend over, clutching my knees. I take a couple long, raspy breaths.

After a bit, having finally calmed down, I stand up and look around. It's somewhat dark, and I still haven't seen anyone. I let out a sigh as my adrenaline finally settles, but then I notice what's around me.

Mirrors. Lining the walls, everywhere.

"A hall of mirrors? Huh, I wonder..." I mutter aloud, walking over to gaze into the nearest one, only for my suspicions to be confirmed. I see myself, but not as I am. This version of me is in a lovely dress, checking her hair as she stands in what seems to be party, with people all around her in formal wear. She looks happy.

Leaving that image behind, I walk around from mirror to mirror, wanting to see what they show me. Moving on to the next one, I see myself in a wedding dress, the smile plastered across my face only further accentuated by what look like tears of joy causing my makeup to run. Then, as if to counter that image, the next one shows me in a hospital bed, the expression on my face utterly emotionless.

Don't lie to yourself.

I move slowly, taking it all in. I wonder who they see me as? Do they see the stage attire? Or do they see something completely different? Or is all of this just an illusion? Question after question runs through my mind as I glide from mirror to mirror, my desire to find an answer growing more and more desperate.

And then, all those thoughts are silenced. I go up to the last mirror in the room, and, looking down, I see me. I see a sixteen-year-old girl, complete with paralyzed legs, stuck in a wheelchair, staring up at me in utter amazement. This one isn't an illusion. This one is me.

Completely taken aback, I stare down at myself in shock. I've been so caught up in what is happening that I nearly forgot how I got here.

Then, the silence between me and the mirror is broken; I can hear the voices of the crowds rising again outside, just like when I first got here. My gaze wanders, wanting to find somebody, anybody else to talk to, but upon looking back to the mirror, I can't seem to pull myself away from it.

Enamored, I raise my arm. The reflection does the same. I warp my face, stretching out and putting on a big, fake smile. And the reflection does the same. It is me as I once was.

I look down to my now-functioning legs. I bend my knees a little, and bounce myself on them. They're everything I longed for, everything I used to have, and yet...

I look back to the reflection. I know exactly what she saw in me. She saw everything she ever wanted, but couldn't be. It was...sad. All these dreams kept from her by a pair of paralyzed legs. But then again... do the legs really keep her from that much?

The thought hits me out of nowhere, but somehow makes sense. Everything I do in this world, sans walking and running, is something I could have done with or without legs. I could explore and adventure, meet wonderful people, and do wonderful things, regardless of my ability to stand. Sure, I can't bounce on trampolines and do stunts, but I'm still happy here even though I don't do those things. Actually, maybe that's the difference.

Maybe the difference isn't the legs. Maybe it's just that I'm happy.

I crack a little smile, and meet my reflection's gaze, and she smiles too. We both reach out, press our hands firmly against the glass, and as we meet each other, everything goes white.

Holding my eyes shut, I take a deep breath. I no longer feel my legs beneath me; I only feel a wheelchair. I open my eyes slowly, and am met with the view of my bedroom mirror, showing me as I normally am: a sixteen-year-old girl in a wheelchair. I sigh. Not having the ability to walk is going to sting, but there are probably better things to focus on right now.

I wheel myself over to my window and peer out. I still see my friends running about, and I smile.

"Yep. Nothing's changed at all," I happily say to myself. I pivot my wheelchair, gaze up at my poster briefly, smile, then open the door, leaving my room. Maybe I'll go out and have some fun at the park.

I roll down the hall, and turn, only to face the stairs looming beneath me. I pause, and Mom's words ring back into my mind. *Don't lie to yourself.* After a few moments, a gentle smile creeps onto my face.

"Hey Mom! Could you come help me down the stairs?" I yell down.

"Carrie? Of course, just give me one minute!" she calls back.

I laugh. I can't wait to get outside. I'm gonna have so much fun.

My mind wanders back to Gambelle. She always found a way to impress, regardless of the odds stacked against her. I let my smile grow.

Because now, as I am, so can I.