

Mirror, Mirror

By Jack Lambert

It wasn't much of a birthday. There were no streamers, no balloons, and the cake was a sad little thing that had sunk in the middle. The pink icing was patchy, and the candles were mismatched, scavenged from boxes of birthdays gone-by. Mum had tried her best. She always did. Even at her age, Ella was aware of their financial situation, even if she couldn't put it into words.

"Make a wish," Mum said, smiling. Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, and the shadows under her eyes seemed deeper, and darker than usual.

Ella squeezed her eyes shut and blew. The candles flickered out, leaving wisps of smoke curling up to the low ceiling of their dim kitchen. She didn't say what she wished for. Not that it mattered.

"Seven years old," Mum said, brushing a crumb from the table. "Almost a grown up."

The girl smiled. "Almost."

The cake tasted heavy and bitty, like wet flour, but Ella ate every bite. Mum had scraped together enough for the ingredients, and wasting it would feel wrong. Besides, today wasn't about the cake. Today was about the carnival.

Mum had saved up for weeks. Every penny from babysitting the neighbor's nightmare twins and helping Mrs. Haymish with her garden had gone into the little tin box under her bed. When she counted it last night, the coins felt heavier than they looked, like they carried the weight of every scraped knee and blistered hand. But it was enough.

"Are we going soon?" Ella asked, unable to keep the excitement from her voice.

Mum hesitated, her smile faltering. "Are you sure you want to go love? We could save the money. Get you something nice for Christmas?"

"Carnival please.", Ella beamed.

There was a pause, then a resigned nod. "Alright. But just for a little while."

The carnival was everything Ella saw in the pictures on the flyer. Strings of lights were draped across the towering poles, linking ride to ride, their colours flickering against the evening sky. The air smelled of sugar and sweat. Obnoxious music roared from every direction, clashing and distorting, combining with the sounds of laughter and rusted metal warping and bending as rides

span and whirled. The noise was deafening, the lights were blinding and Ella couldn't move more than 2 feet forward without being bumped or kicked back to where she started.

She absolutely loved it.

"Where to first?" Mum asked, clutching Ella's hand as if she were scared it would fall off if she let go.

Ella's eyes darted across the booths and rides, eventually fixing on the sign in the corner. It was illuminated by a row of alternating yellow and red bulbs, flashing in sequence around the edge of the painted board reading: Hall Of Mirrors.

"That one please," Ella said.

Mum frowned. "I'm not sure, Ella. It might be a bit too big for you."

"I'm seven now."

Her Mum gave her a sympathetic smile. "Alright, Mrs. But be careful and keep hold of my hand, we don't want you getting lost."

Ella nodded, and she squeezed her Mum's hand even tighter as they began to walk.

The Hall of Mirrors was tucked into a quieter corner of the carnival, a considerable distance away from the screeching rides and neon arcade signs. The entrance was framed by a tattered and aged red curtain, and a wooden sign was propped against the wall beside it, written in chalk: Entrance £1 Per Person.

"Alright, it's a pound each," Mum said, crouching down beside Ella. "So if we go in here then we've only got a few rides left, okay?"

Ella nodded.

They approached the booth where a thin man in a fraying carnival jacket and a tilted top hat, scuffed on the edges, lounged behind a small wooden counter. He didn't smile, nor did he look up, or in any way acknowledge their presence.

"Two tickets, please," Mum said, fishing the coins from her purse.

The man stretched out his bony hand. "Two quid each."

Ella's Mum blinked. "The sign says it's a pound"

"Sign's out of date," he said, shrugging. "It's two now. Inflation."

Mum stood frozen. She didn't so much as breathe. Ella was unsure of her next move. Eventually, her Mum opened her purse again. Ella could see the calculation behind her eyes,

working out what had already been spent on admission and travel, what was left, and what couldn't be spared.

"It's her birthday. Can't we do a pound? We-"

The man sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Sorry lady, two pound. Take it or leave it."

"You should really sort your attitude out, you know that?", Ella's Mum exploded, "It's my daughter's birthday and she's waited weeks for this, and you-"

"It's okay, Mum," Ella said softly, pulling at her Mum's sleeve, "I can go on my own. I'll be fine."

Mum's mouth pressed into a thin line. "Are you sure? I'll wait right here for you, I promise. I won't go anywhere and I'll be right here when you come out."

"I'm seven now," Ella repeated, "I'll be okay".

Her Mum paused, then gave a reluctant nod. She handed over the coins, and the man slapped a flimsy paper ticket on the counter.

"I'll stay just here," Mum said, kneeling down to brush a stray hair from Ella's face. "Don't get scared, okay? Nothing can hurt you. Be a brave girl."

"I will"

Her Mum gave her a gentle kiss on the head, and Ella turned towards the waving red curtains. She took a deep breath, gathered herself, and stepped through.

The darkness inside completely consumed her, and the cold air bit through to her bones. She had no grasp on the height of the room, nor the width. Despite the creaking, decrepit appearance of the structure, they had succeeded in eliminating any cracks or gaps through which sunlight could possibly creep.

Behind her, she could still feel the curtains, rough and coarse between her fingers. It stood to reason that if she could reach out in front of her, she may be able to feel her way forward.

Without moving her feet, she slowly released one hand from the curtain. It was as if she were stood on a tightrope, afraid to let go in case she fell into the abyss below. She closed her eyes, just for a moment, and then swung her free hand forward, grabbing at what she could. There was another curtain, black this time, presumably, it was too dark to be sure, but much softer than the wiry sheet behind her. It was almost like silk.

She freed her second hand, with an increased sense of security in what was to come, and grasped the curtain ahead of her, before slowly creeping along the imagined wire towards it. With a heavy breath, she pulled the curtains wide.

On the other side was a labyrinth of mirrors, covering every inch of every surface, reaching up higher than she could see and stretching for miles in every direction. A thousand faces stared back at her, some slightly stretched, some marked or scratched, but all, unmistakably, her. It was like stepping onto a stage before a silent audience, waiting for her to perform, but she had nothing prepared. So she stood. She stood and stared back.

After a minute or two, Ella had begun to adjust. It was not as intimidating as it seemed initially, and certainly not nearly as threatening. If she smiled, they smiled back. If she waved, they waved in reply. If this is an audience, she thought, then it is an audience of me, and I know I'm nice, so they must be nice too. She shuffled forward a couple of steps, curiously testing out her environment, and sure enough, the thousands in front shuffled closer. She stepped to the side and they stepped with her. She raised her hand and a thousand hands raised theirs. Not the same hand, but they were trying their best, and after a few minutes of dancing, laughing and pulling the funniest faces she could think of, she decided she had exhausted the potential of the mirrors, and that it was time to move onwards to new pastures.

She waved goodbye to her mirror friends and turned towards the silk curtain which was...

which was around...

it must've been just here because...

Ella was sure she hadn't explored far. She had barely moved at all when she came in, and then just a few steps after that. Perhaps she had turned a corner without noticing? It was hard to tell, everything looked so similar. Mum had told her not to be scared, and she was seven now, and getting lost was not something seven-year-olds do. She gathered herself and assessed the situation. Maybe, if she was to retrace her steps, then she would find where she came in. She began to walk forward, and then turned a sharp corner to her left, bumping her nose on what seemed to be a corridor, but was just another mirror. This told her that it can't have been that direction, so back she turned, although this didn't seem to be where she just was. It confused her that everything could look exactly the same as everything else, and yet nothing was familiar.

She began to move at a slightly quicker speed, not out of fear, because she was anything but scared, but rather out of...impatience. She kept her right hand on the mirrors as she ran along the halls and her left hand out in front of her, this way she wouldn't run into anything, nor would she end up getting confused about which way she was facing.

She began to run quicker.

Then quicker.

Then quicker and quicker and quicker dragging her hands along the mirrors, smearing them with the sweat from her palms until...

She reached one long corridor.

There were no mirrors along the sides, nor on the ceiling or the floors, but there was one, right at the very end. It was about Ella's height, and just slightly wider, leaning against the far wall, looking out at the stretch before her.

And in this mirror, was Ella...

But this Ella was different...

This Ella was not smiling and playing and laughing and jumping, nor was it raising its hand and waving its arms.

This Ella was completely still.

Her hands were down at her sides, her feet together and her head slightly tilted at an angle, almost unnoticeable but certainly there. The reflection was, in almost all other aspects, completely usual. The shoes were right, the yellow dress her Grandmother had bought her was there, and her hair was exactly replicated down to the slightest strand.

The most notable difference was her face.

She had sunken eyes, almost completely black, and her skin was pale and cold, like it was drained of all life.

And she looked as though she was screaming.

Her mouth was open beyond the natural abilities of any person, and her eyes were so wide, they looked as though they'd fall out. She was clearly in some sort of distress, but there was no movement, and no sound. Like a photo of a child, paralysed with fear.

In this regard, they were exactly alike.

Ella stood at the end of the corridor, staring down the dark hallway that seemed to stretch on forever, and her eyes were fixed on that mirror. She couldn't bear what she was seeing, it frightened her to her very core, and yet she could not move, nor look away.

What could she do?

She couldn't scream for help, Mum was outside and Mum said not to be scared. She said nothing could hurt her. She was seven now and nothing could hurt her.

Nothing could hurt her.

Ella did the only thing she could do. She tightened her fists, tensed her shoulders and her knees and her toes as tight as she could and shut her eyes.

Perhaps when she opened them she would be home, and she would be in bed, and she would be safe.

5...4...3...2...1...

She opened her eyes.

The girl in the mirror was still there...

Only she had moved...

She was almost in the exact same position, in the exact same way, only now her hand was pressed against the glass. Her palm pushed so hard against the pane it looked as though she might force her way out of the mirror.

Ella's breathing slowed. Over the course of just a moment, the fear seemed to dissipate. She was now overwhelmed with a sense of sadness, seeing no malice in the reflection, but instead, a loneliness. A feeling of isolation. She truly believed the reflection needed reassurance and comfort, and before she could think on that feeling anymore, she felt herself stepping forward, slowly, dragging her feet like a marionette. As she approached the mirror, she raised her own hand, her fingers trembling slightly.

The air in the room grew thick, and Ella felt as though something unseen was urging her forward. Inch by inch, her hand moved closer to the cold, gleaming surface.

She could feel her heartbeat pounding in her chest.

As she stared into the eyes of the girl in the mirror, now merely inches away, Ella hovered her hand, just beside the surface.

Just for a moment.

Then her fingertips touched the glass, and an icy shock ran up her arm. Ella gasped. The reflection's eyes widened as the glass rippled like water.

Then everything went black.

Ella tumbled through darkness, spinning without end. It was suffocating, she could feel her lungs contracting and the air around her closing in and crushing her. There was no sound, no light, only the feeling of descent. She tried to scream, but no noise came. Just as the panic threatened to consume her, the freefall stopped...and she floated.

The darkness remained, but the weightlessness was soothing, like drifting in a warm lake beneath a starless sky. It wrapped around her like a thick blanket, numbing her senses. For a moment, it was peaceful.

Then came the pull.

A sudden force yanked her downwards. The warmth vanished. She clawed at the void, but there was nothing to grasp.

And then, she opened her eyes.

The blackness had receded, but the world she now faced was still... strange. She was inside the mirror, looking out.

The world beyond was distorted, as if warped by a crack in the glass. The surface was cold, unyielding.

She opened her mouth to shout, but no sound emerged. Her chest tightened, her throat closing as if the mirror itself was swallowing her voice. She tried again, and again, but nothing.

Her panic surged. She hammered her fists against the glass as hard as she could, her heart racing, but the glass remained firm, silent, and unbroken.

Then, she saw her again. The girl stood there in front of her, standing where she stood just seconds before, her eyes still hollow and sunken, still pale and thin, with her lips parted in a soundless, mocking grin..

"Ella! We need to go now love!" Her Mum's voice called from somewhere outside, faint and distant. That voice should have relaxed her. It should have made her feel more safe and calm than anything else in the world, but it didn't come close.

The girl in the mirror smiled wider, the smirk curling cruelly at the corners of her lips. She tilted her head, as though savouring Ella's fear.

Then the girl turned and walked away. As she moved, she never looked back. Her retreating figure vanished into the darkness beyond the glass.

Ella was left alone. Her hands pressed against the cold barrier, her body trembling with the urgency to escape. She clawed at the mirror, her nails scraping uselessly against the smooth surface. But no matter how hard she tried, the glass didn't budge.

"Please help! Please!" Ella's screams cried out into the darkness.

But there was no one to hear them.