

Mirror Image - Lois Peterson

When my mother took us on the pier at Brighton, towards the jangle of hurdy gurdie and the ping and rattle of mechanical toys, my sister and I danced along the hollow boards, the sea licking the girders below, the sun slanting across our cheeks above.

We were five years old in Sunday-best frills and polished like bright wood, and with curls. We had boot button eyes and thin legs with knees like walnuts. And we held hands.

Look at my hands. You will see capable hands, short and firm. The nails are straight, the quicks white like the lick of surf across a sand-packed beach. But look harder and you will see a mark along the edge of the right thumb, no longer a scar, but something darker, like a splinter of night.

When we were born, I came last and without warning. My sister was expected and welcomed, and while my mother rested, sipping the brandy my father had bribed a nurse to carry in to her, I advanced along the dark, moist passage of her body and burst forth into the light.

In those days, medicine's most reliable tools were the knowing hand, the experienced eye, but neither had detected my presence or my coming. My sister and I, the first born and the latecomer, were laid together in a makeshift bed, a stone hot water bottle, inadequately swaddled, between us. And this mark, a small burn, is mine to prove I was there.

Until the day on the pier, pennies chinking in our pretty pockets - Father bestowed them on us before he slumped low in his chair to sleep off luncheon - my sister and I were happy together and seldom apart. And when we were parted, we were in constant pursuit of each other.

My mother walked alongside us on the pier. She enjoyed the smiles that came to us from others who liked to see us, without needing to know who was who or which was which.

We wanted to do only one thing after we'd done with leaning over the rails to watch the salty sea roil below. We went into the noise of the Hall of Games, past the glass cases with toys that rattled and mechanical hands that grabbed at air or nothing, and past the big lady who sat over a glass ball and drew from it stories that would never come true.

We held hands. My sister drew me along behind her and mother followed.

'The mirrors today. We have enough for the mirrors, do we mother?' I asked.

'Enough,' she said, and her hand on my back urging me forward told me so.

There were heavy curtains to walk through, thick velvet that might have been wings of night. With mother's warm hand on our backs we walked into the long, thin room, gashed by mirrors.

At first the mirrors were just light, like morning slipping up above a windowsill. Then they were water, for as we moved, they moved and tilted although we could see nothing but their own movement. We drew closer, and there before us in the mirror, appeared my sister, Mother, and I. We were holding hands, with mother in the middle and a child on each side.

We stepped across the boards to the mirror that was all light and the light that was just mirror. Mother's shoes clicked and our feet were a quiet tap and there was a rustle of frills and ribbons. And the sea sighed through the walls.

The mirrors began to fill up with light which moved like scarves that swoop around ladies' necks, and then they stilled as we moved closer. Then there was no sound. The sea had gone away, and I saw that mother stood between us and on each side of her stood a child.

I felt the crisp edge of lace at my neck, and I saw lace at the necks of both children. My patent shoe pinched my feet, and there in the mirror were two pairs of Sunday patent shoes. There were curls and button eyes and hands held in mother's warm white gloves. I looked into the eyes in the mirror but there were two pairs of eyes. I searched for those which were mine, but I could not tell which were mine and which were those of my sister.

And then the sea came back with a roar.

My mother will tell you that my fever did not abate for many days and that the only words I spoke in that time were always the same.

'Which am I?'

I loved my sister, I hated her. She was different from me and I loved that. She was the same as me and I loved that, too. I loved us both and hated us both, too. But now I no longer knew my sister or myself.

We shared more years after that day on the pier, and were still seldom apart. We had grown out of our button boots and curls many years before my sister was taken by an illness that began in her eyes and moved to her throat and finally stopped her heart.

A mirror hangs above the long dresser in a room that looks over the sea and beyond to France.

There is a tradition that when a man dies, his wife cuts her hair and dons her husband's suit. And there is another, that on a death all mirrors are covered so no image will shine back into the place from

which the dead have gone.

I cut my hair when my sister died. I donned my father's suit, the one that has hung in the musty wardrobe in the back bedroom since he died twelve years ago. When I showed myself to my mother, with short hair and in a man's suit, she had to be calmed.

But my mother does approve of the covered mirrors, for this ritual will help her through the loss of her firstborn child who she loved, although there have been times when she could not tell which of us was whom. I wonder if she would know which is gone if she did not have a name to cry out as she weeps.

I hated my sister, I loved her. She was myself and I loved that. I was different from her and I hated that. I loved us both and hated us both, too.

If one of us had drowned, very young, in the waves that lap up the beach and spit out stones, and we had been naked and one had drowned and one had not, who would know who still lived?

My mother calls for me and I pull aside the curtains to see the carriage at the door, long and dark as a beast. I go to my mother's room and she slips her gloved hand through my arm and together we go from this house where her daughter died. We step up into the cab and it moves along the street like the rise and fall of the tide across the shingled beach.

Later, when the words are said and the soil is turned, dark and moist and smelling of the darkness below, and flowers are thrown down to the shining box, we return to tea. Our guests speak of the war and politicians and the lack of things they are used to and the fear of what might come.

When they are gone, mother will go to her room at the back of the house. I will walk past the closed door between, and beyond to mine. And I will take my mirror, blackened by velvet, and I will lift it from the wall and take it to the cellar, and I will do the same with all the others from the house. Then I will walk away from them all.

I have never known who I am, but now I am the only one left.

I have a scar that is mine alone. The one that survived is the one with the scar.

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