



the  
child in  
the mirror

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The child was exuberant.

He was free. Free. Unshackled from his disapproving parents. Released from that fruitless relationship built on gain and pride. Through this, he was also liberated from his step siblings, and so henceforth need not bother again with their bickering or competition. The child was finally his own man, of sorts, standing proudly on his own spindly young legs. The road ahead was overshadowed by uncertainty and doubt, but glittering hope lined each step of the way. Hope as promising as the shine of a new crescent moon. Hope as beckoning as the stars of the evening sky.

The child settled into work. To survive, to thrive, so much needed to be attended to. Where to stay, how to stay, whom to do work for and when and where. So as to prevent the mistakes of his disassociated parents, mistakes birthed from ego and disregard, the child took exceeding efforts to never avoid the worst and to always confront the most harrowing head-on. Not once did he shy from a stand-off. Not once did he shrink from a fight too; conversely, he found the euphoria of a skirmish invigorating. This hardiness, this unfaltering resilience, did not immediately pay off. But in the long run, it ultimately rewarded. The child won the respect of those he fought hard to stand amongst. He earned the nods and praises of compatriots and seniors alike. While it was once imagined, he was now truly his own fellow. He was his own champion. His own best defender too.

The child grew up. He became a proud teenager, strong physically and mentally. With the onset of adolescence came a fresh set of challenges, foremost of which was not the question of how to survive, but which was the best way to survive. Friends, from near and far, then began gathering at the teen's nifty habitat with suggestions. Some came with gifts. Other came with demands for gifts. Quite a few also came with gifts that demanded better gifts in return. Not unfamiliar with the workings of the world, he was after all from a dysfunctional family, the teen was always cordial and careful with whoever he spoke with. "Yes, I love to be friends," was his usual opening declaration. "But only as friends who are equals. I am no longer anybody's kid brother." "Of course not!" Those would be friends cried. "We have always admired you. Your accomplishments humble us! If only, if only! We grew up as shrewd as you!"

To which the teen would smile and offer his handshake. His careful handshake.

The teen soon had many friends. Some loyal, some faithful, some pretended too. Through them, he expanded his home, broadened his fame, and thus ensured his continued success. While this happened, he segued into adulthood, becoming the man he always dreamed of growing into, one who was strong, respected and dignified. Proudly, he faced the future, confident of triumphing over whatever challenges it might bring. In all likelihood, he could have attained greater success, would have, had he then not suffered the first mishap of his life. While strolling around his new garden one evening, he failed to notice a rock and had a most unsightly stumble. The man didn't fall flat on his face, his reflexes were fast enough to save him. But he did twist his ankle quite awkwardly and painfully. For the first time in his life, the

man needed to consult a doctor.

“You must rest,” the doctor advised. “It is nothing serious, but you must still allow your injury to fully heal. Otherwise, it would worsen into a chronic weakness.”

“How long do I need to rest?”

“Oh, three months or so. Half a year is ideal.”

“Half a year?” the man exclaimed. “Are you joking? How could I rest for half a year? I have business associates waiting to see me as we speak! Ridiculous! Give me some painkillers and be done with it. I’d be well in a few days’ time.”

“Painkillers wouldn’t heal you. They only mask the injury.”

“Nonsense! Give me those painkillers now, or I’m switching to a better doctor.”

The doctor, knowing better than to argue further with the man, dispensed the painkillers without another word. But as he predicted, the pills were no more than a temporary relief and soon the man was again in hobbling pain. Too prideful to return to the same doctor, or to go to any other, the man switched to consulting his friends. Through his servants, he learned some of them previously suffered similar accidents. A handful of them managed to recover completely.

“Your doctor is right,” one of them said. “You need to rest. All such injuries need time to heal.”

“I don’t have time for rest. There are tons of things waiting for me to attend to.”

“If you don’t rest, this pain is going to stay with you for life.”

“Are you here as my ex-doctor’s parrot? Why are you repeating his words to me?”

“That’s the problem with you,” another said pointedly. “You no longer listen. Your success has gone to your head and you think you are unique and superior. You forget all of us are ultimately the same.”

“The same as you? How could I be the same as any of you? How many of you could match my accomplishments? How many of you survived and succeeded with so little? You’re gloating, that’s what it is. You are happy to see me unwell because this helps you feel better about yourselves.”

To which his friends smiled, said nothing and quietly left. Infuriated, the man turned to his house servants for suggestions. He had many by then, well over a hundred. Such a large number was necessary to manage the vast new estate the man built.

“You are right, master. Your friends are jealous of your accomplishments,” the servants droned in unison. “They seek only to run you down. They seek only to humiliate you! Throw a party! Build a monument. Remind them you are still vastly their superior!”

“That doesn’t make sense! How is a party going to get rid of this pain in my ankle? And in my back,” the man grumbled.

“Throw a party, master! Have a celebration! You will be too overjoyed to remember the pain!”

And so the man, feeling rather middle aged at that point, hosted a party. And because everything was so loud, so gaudy and so exuberant, it was as the servants promised. The man did forget his pain for a while as he hobbled from one champagne to another. But with the ebbing of the jubilation, the trashing of the decorations and banners, the pain returned, this time spreading and incapacitating his entire leg. To make things worse, the man started hearing stories of his friends celebrating his ailment. Rumour was, some of them were throwing their own parties to gloat about his condition. One of them, so said, was even planning to buy over the man’s swanky new estate.

“What has happened?” The man held another conference with his servants. “What has happened to me and my reputation? I’m still the same person. All I had was, one bad evening.”

“Do not worry, my lord,” the servants said. “We will remove those who speak ill of you. We will not allow any man or woman, or animal, to continue sullyng your great name. They will trouble you no more.”

“When did you ...” The man was puzzled. “When did you start addressing me as your lord?”

“Why, we have been doing so for years!” The servants cried. “Do you not deserve this glorious title? Do you not rule us mightily from your throne, cognisant of everything that happens before your feet?”

The accolades confused the man. What was happening? What has happened? While he struggled to comprehend, an elderly servant, a wizened, ugly one, stepped forth and bowed respectfully. At the sight of his crinkled face, the man cringed in distaste. Vaguely, he remembered assigning this ugly one to toilet scrubbing in the lowest basement. It was something about keeping him out of sight. Something about not upsetting the whole household with his presence.

“Who ... are you?” The man couldn’t remember the unsightly one’s name. He was unsure he wanted to. “What ... What do you want?”

“I’m you, my lord,” the awful-looking one replied cheerfully. “Do you not recognise me? I am your will and your conscience. I am also your father and your son. Rejoice, for all is not lost,

my lord! Your problems can be resolved if you would simply face and acknowledge me.”

“What nonsense you speak!” The man snapped. “How could you be me? You’re the one I banished to the basement toilet! To keep you out of sight! I have not stepped into the basement for years.”

“Years, my lord? You shifted into this citadel but a month ago.”

“I ...” The man gazed around him and realised he recognised nothing. With that, it also dawned on him that none of the servants were familiar to him. Including the ugly one. “Who are you,” he whispered, now terrified. “What ... are you?”

“I have already replied, my lord. I am your will and your conscience. You lost me when you shifted into this magnificent fortress.”

The man broke down. Screaming hysterically, he yelled for the horrible one to be removed and that was swiftly done. The enigmatic words, however, deeply traumatised him, and so later that evening, the man found himself completely unable to sleep. Wandering to his mirror, he gazed into it and gasped in bewilderment when a child stared back. A whimsical looking one. So pensive, yet also so arrogant in the way he stood with folded arms. Fearful again, but at the same time also fascinated, the man reached for this mirage. With great revulsion, the child retreated. He also clucked his tongue loudly.

“I ... I want to be you,” the man, now very old, pleaded.

“But I don’t want to be you,” the child grimaced.

“What has happened? What became of me? Tell me. Tell me, please. How do I return to being a child? How do I return to being you?”

The child did not answer. For how could a reflection possibly have any answer for anything? And so the man, and the image he pined for, stared at each other for many hours. From that night onward, the man found it impossible to again rest or sleep. This insomnia persisted no matter what he did. Eventually, he lost his sanity. None of his servants or remaining friends could do anything about it.

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