

Hiding Shy

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The wind whipped up the stairwell and out over the porch. It blew the ash off Mitch's cigarette, leaving a glowing red coal flickering in the darkness. The spring gust caught the door to the apartment and Mitch jumped as it slammed shut. He turned his eyes back to the night sky, realizing it was just the wind. Then the door started to shudder, bouncing in its frame as if caught in the hands of two fighting children. It began to thunder, banging violently, and Mitch heard the hall mirror come down with an explosion of glass.

He grabbed the glass knob and the door went limp, hanging still on its hinges. He slowly pushed and felt the cold of the doorknob soak into his skin. It was freezing, just on the edge of welding the skin of his palm to the glass. He panicked and kicked the door, knocking the knob out of his grip. The door flung open and drove trenches into the linoleum with the broken glass caught under the kick plate.

He expected to see her, but every time the hallway was empty. She didn't appear until later. That was late June and she was still hiding then. It didn't matter in the dream though, then and now mixed carelessly.

Mitch woke and lay still in the dark, trying not to betray his awakening. He scanned the room, eyes searching the mirrors set on every wall. Some hung flat; others were wedged out with pieces of cardboard, twisted paperclips, anything to catch the right angle. Each mirror was the mouth of another tunnel. Each tunnel showed another room, another corner, every corner of the apartment.

Mitch looked for her, but it was out of habit. The moon was new, it was still dark and the night sky empty. The city lights slipped in through the empty windows, but without the moon the rooms were only a murky gray. He gave up searching, as he remembered it wouldn't wax bright enough for another four days.

The dream of that first evening, the slamming door and the first broken mirror, came often in the nights. It was when she had slipped inside, he was sure of that. Why the dream kept coming, whether she was pushing it or it was just part of his obsession with her, he didn't know. All the same, the clock was flipping over to four a.m. and another night's rest was shot.

Mitch had named her Shy, after the shock of seeing her subsided. The first time he had woken on the couch, long after the late-night hosts had signed off. She crossed the living room behind him just as his eyes had opened, and he caught the movement out of the mirror. He had spun around, his mind calling out *intruder, thief, murderer*, and knocked the lamp off the table. It broke and left him in darkness. He grabbed a heavy book and sprinted into the kitchen, then lighted every lamp on the way back to the living room.

"There's nothing there, never was. You're jumping at shadows," he had muttered to himself, but still lay awake for hours.

Mitch had always jumped in the beginning. She could still spook him, during the rare times he forgot he no longer lived alone. He tried not to react too much; it was pointless to do anything. Every time Shy appeared and he rushed through the apartment

after her, she disappeared for days. Mitch gave up completely when he realized why he had never seen her up close. *In the mirrors, never in the room*, he thought, sitting breathless after a particularly long chase.

Shy hid in the mirrors, crossing in the darkness and always deep in the room's reflection, far away from him. He lifted his head out of his hands and began to watch the reflections out of the corner of his eyes. Now it was an unshakable habit.

The cashier had given him an odd look when Mitch rolled up with a cart full of new mirrors. *Redecorating, or just vain?* was the question in her eyes, and he had muttered some excuse. With the second cartful, he hadn't even bothered. What would you say?

"I'm looking for a ghost in my apartment. She roams through the mirrors at night and I can't stop looking for her." If the cashier didn't write down his driver's license number after that, there would have been something odd about her as well.

Mitch started slow, placing a few mirrors in the study and in the kitchen, soon connecting them one by one until all corners of the apartment were visible from the bedroom. While Shy moved, he lay still, pretending to sleep.

Often he woke to the slow cracking sound of glass and the shortening of another avenue. His mind, thick from sleep, brought him back to his childhood room in Wisconsin. The sound of the lake in late winter would wake him at nights, the loud pop and tearing run of the ice collapsing under its own weight. The breaking mirrors sounded the same, as Shy pressed slow with one finger and then pushed the crack down the face of the glass. It was always a large mirror, as if it had betrayed too much of her and she could

not stand to be out in the open. He let those go and put smaller mirrors in their place. It was harder to see, but better than not seeing her at all.

In the mornings, Mitch woke wondering if he was crazy. Mirrors covered the small apartment.

“I’m living in a fuckin’ fun house.” He couldn’t walk across a room without his own host following him about. He hadn’t invited anyone in for months. He gave up dating all together. What woman would last the night, let alone call the day after? It seemed crazy. It was crazy, in the day.

At night though, Shy began to roam and Mitch loved to watch. It had taken awhile, but now she came out of the corners and into the pale light pouring in from the bare windows. She almost glowed under the moon, long black hair falling in curls about her face. It hid her features, but Mitch could see her eyes were dark and deep, her face pristine.

Shy walked quiet, bare feet hardly settling on the floor. She went on her toes, peeking through the frames and scanning the rooms before moving. She moved like a mouse, always afraid of the cat and Mitch wondered whom she was watching for. She stood and stared, sometimes for hours, out the windows or at some corner of the room. He wondered what she saw, what he couldn’t see outside the reflection. At times he woke, forgetting that he had slept, and found her watching him sleep.

By Christmas, she moved freely and without fear, though her choice of mirrors became more particular. She continued to break those she didn’t like. Mitch wondered if

she was protecting her hiding places. Mirror replacements became a monthly budget item, right there with the gas and groceries. He tried to respect her wishes, but could not give up watching her. Instead, he continued to buy smaller mirrors, resigning himself to only glimpses of her movement in most rooms.

By February she was narrowing his gaze to almost nothing. There wasn't even a full-length mirror in the place to check himself for work. So when he woke to another slow running crack, he leapt to his feet and ran into the kitchen. Shy was off running as he entered, the crack hanging half down the glass and splitting the reflection into a disjointed two. He knew her favorite route, sneaking through the smaller mirrors in the study, and into the living room. He chased after, yelling. It was his apartment, his mirrors, his money spent on what he would choose. She darted deep into the reflections, jumping from one avenue to another. His blood rose as he ran, waking him fully, and he wondered again if he was still sane. He was yelling at an apparition, a shadow of life, and any doctor would put him in a padded cell if they had witnessed this outburst. Mitch slunk back to the bed. She would hide for a month now and how could he blame her? Still he was angry, but he didn't know why or at what. This whole thing was crazy and he couldn't begin to rationalize it to himself.

Mitch let himself sleep, certain there would be nothing to see now that she was frightened. Instead, Shy came closer to him and he woke. His eyes opened and he was in a bedroom, but not his. Where there were two doors before, one to the study and one to the kitchen, now they were gone and twenty hallways had taken their place. Small paths retreated through the walls, all carved upon the plaster in glowing moonlight. Each led to

another room by another angle. Mitch had never imagined the catacomb of reflections Shy wandered through, but he recognized them now. He was inside her mirrors and he felt her hands moving down his shoulders, slipping under the sheet.

Mitch rolled onto his back and was alone, her touch felt but not seen. His eyes landed on a path ending in only a dead-end. Its image was his bed and Shy. He recognized it as where the mirror across from the bed should be. He saw her kneel on the comforter and he watched her hand, felt her hand, pull his face upward away from the sight. He closed his eyes and she slid under the covers beside him. Her touch was soft, her skin just cooler than his own, and he let himself relax. Her lips grazed his neck and her body warmed with his. His hands shook as they reached out, afraid of finding nothing, but she was there, smooth and solid in the darkness. He let her guide, and she took him slow, but strong, focused and intense.

Mitch woke, the morning already past. He lay in bed wondering. If it was a dream, how much was his mind showing that it had lost hold? If it had been real, why had she done it? Was it forgiveness, acceptance, bribery? Had she come in response to his rage, fearful and making amends? Whatever the cause, he would not yell again. Even if that meant she would stay away, he could not yell at her again.

Shy did not stay away, though she did not come to him again in the same way. As winter began to lose its hold, the hard edge of the wind softening into spring, Mitch saw her standing more often at the edge of the front hallway. He would lie, half asleep, watching her lean against the corner and gaze toward the door. Sometimes, after he had dropped off, he would wake and feel her near. She would lie with him, curling up close

but not enough to touch him. He would feel her weight on the sheets, smell the spice in her hair as the draft from the window slipped over her body, but mostly she stood and watched the hallway.

It was May, and she did not move about the apartment anymore. Her vigil at the hallway had become almost permanent. He could not see the door; the mirror there had been broken when she entered so violently last summer. Mitch had never replaced it, but he knew Shy was looking toward the door. They had spent a year together and as he felt her weight return to the bed, he wondered if she was ready to leave. He felt her fingers graze his hair, felt her breath on his neck as she curled close, thinking him asleep.

“Oh, damn it,” he said as he woke with the answer idling about his brain. She had passed into the apartment through the hall mirror. He had never replaced it and Shy could not reach the door on her own. He had kept it closed from her.

After work, Mitch sat on the porch, the smoke from his cigarette twisting in the spring breeze. The new mirror leaned against the railing and reflected the setting sun. He watched it descend past the glass and wondered where it went beneath the frame, what part of that hidden world did it still light. He wondered if he could put the mirror on the hallway wall. Mitch had spent a year with Shy in his apartment, dwelling in every corner of his mind. He flicked the cigarette into the wind and wedged the door open. The mirror set easily over the old nail and he leaned another against the railing, giving a view to the stairs.

Mitch lay in bed as the last scratches of light fled before the darkness and waited for Shy. He could see the long tunnel of reflection now running past the hall and out to

the porch, but Shy was not there. Mitch dozed, waiting for her to come out of hiding when the sound snapped his eyes back open.

“Baaaby.” It was a slow, low call, the word soft but the voice hard and cold. His eyes flitted across the mirrors and came to rest on the hall. He caught the dim outline of someone at the door. It wasn’t Shy.

Intruder, thief, murderer, his mind cried out. He hadn’t considered a stranger would see the open door and climb the porch stairs.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” he whispered. He had been so concerned with whether or not Shy would leave, he hadn’t thought of this. The outline edged forward and a banner of light crossed the figure. It was a man, long hair unwashed, unkempt. His white shirt was mottled with dark patches. His hands curled open and back into fists as if they were wind-up toys getting ready to play.

Mitch grabbed the bat from beside the bed. The floor creaked under his feet and sent him running. *Surprise him, he’ll turn tail,* he told himself and ran screaming. He rushed around the corner and down the hall, hoping to catch the intruder before he made it past the door. His yell was a babble of nonsense, driven out of his throat without focus, no thought of what words to summon.

His bare feet slapped on the porch deck and he swung about, the bat cutting empty air. He flipped on the light and there was no one. He leaned over the railing, no one. The stairs were empty and he heard a crash, the fall of glass sprinkling somewhere in the house.

Christ, he made it past, his mind cried. He rushed back in yelling, and stopped in the study as the white shirt flashed out of the corner of his eye. He turned and swung. The bat sent glass flying from the mirror. Mitch froze as he heard the voice again.

“Baaaby. We need to talk. Come up close, beautiful.” The voice was distant, coming from somewhere much deeper than a two-bedroom apartment could manage. The voice spoke pleasant, but masking a hard edge waiting to cut.

Shy flashed through the study, her image stuttered as if under a strobe as she raced through the small mirrors angled across the room. Mitch heard her scream, the first time she had raised her voice at all. A thud followed, the solid thump with a hint of slapping skin from the knuckles.

“Baaaby, where are you going? This ain’t the way you promised to love and obey. Come up close where we can talk.”

Mitch went cold. His throat tightened and his hands began to shake. He had let this man in. The one Shy had been watching for. She wasn’t looking to get out; she was standing guard against him. She had run free last spring, a year of escape, and he had let this man in.

Shy jumped back through the study, weaving and twisting through the hundreds of paths created by the mirrors. In each one, there was the reflection of another, and she used them to run. The man was in no hurry. He walked slow, choosing his path at whim, jumping across the larger mirrors to cover more ground. A black tail of her hair trailed from his clenched fist. Mitch smelled blood and knew what the dark patches on that white

shirt meant. He was here to finish the job, started last spring, or was it long before? How long had Shy been on the run?

Mitch ran from the study, horror soaking into his gut, his breath a small squeaking gasp for air. Glass crunched under his feet and he stumbled as his heel split under a sharp edge. He came down on the bed, his blood staining the sheets. He pulled the shard from his foot and saw Shy in the mirror beside him. He jumped her face so close, so beautiful, and so bruised. Her lips moved, but she had no more voice than he. Mitch did not need to hear the words to know she was pleading, crying for help. She dashed off as that dead voice called for her and Mitch watched from the bed as she ran, diving down the long endless paths he had hung on the walls.

Shy jumped between the small mirrors, her oldest trails when she was most frightened of him. The man followed, growing close and almost catching her as he crossed through the larger mirrors. Mitch watched the chase and his fingers tightened hard around the bat. He knew Shy's paths; he had watched her walk them for a year. The man did not, and he turned in circles after her.

Mitch stepped back on the floor, the glass under his feet an unregistered pain. Silver shards rained down as he started in on the mirrors. He chased after Shy, cutting the routes out from behind her. He closed off the easy avenues, the larger mirrors crashed down, leaving the man turning about, searching harder for his prey. His voice grew strained, the sweet call of "baaaby" turning wild and angry.

The bat swung too late and the man turned into the path and caught Shy, his fingers ripping the shoulder from her gown. Mitch lunged, hand stretched out to grab at

the intruder, forgetting the barrier between them. The glass shattered under his hand, the skin splitting under its edges. He wiped the blood on his shirt and raced ahead. Shy had made it free on her own and another swing separated her from the man.

The living room was finished; bare frames outlined the holes and cracked plaster like strange angry art. The man was forced into the small mirrors, long twisting paths and Mitch was cutting them out from under him. The floor was starred with glass and slick with blood. The pain in his feet was beginning to reach his mind, his adrenaline not enough to keep it down. His stomach was sick, twisted, and he was certain that he would throw up before this was all over.

Only Shy's longest paths were left on the walls and she raced through them at a sprint, hiding in corners and jumping ahead of her killer. Mitch trimmed off the branches as Shy flashed by, and in a last rush, he ran after, crushing the last mirrors behind her.

The man yelled, curses rolling across the rooms. The voice held more rage than Mitch thought possible in a human. He walked slow through the apartment, his feet so numb that he didn't feel the continued tattering of his flesh, just the solid waves of pain. He followed the voice and sat on his bed. The man was there, inside the side mirror where he had watched Shy come to him. It was the last in the room and the bat had removed its exit. The husband's eyes were wide with anger. His hands clutched the hair and the piece of fabric from her shoulder. They were worthless now, like second-hand trophies. Spit flew from his lips, flying after the curses and threats.

Mitch reached out, taking the mirror off the wall. His hand slid across the glass, blood covering the raging intruder. He grabbed a pillowcase and dropped it over the frame, dark stains spreading through the fabric like the spring blooms.

He got to his feet, one last walk, and searched the house. Few mirrors were left, and he almost passed the hall before he caught Shy's form. She stood in the doorway reflection. Her hand rose in a hesitant wave and brushed the hair over her shoulder. The dark eyes sparkled blue over her first smile granted to him. She turned and he saw her in the mirror still leaning against the porch rail. She was running, in her light-footed way, down the stairs and into the darkness.

Mitch limped to the bathroom and set his feet in the tub, wondering where to hide the reflection of his new screaming roommate.