

## ***FROM THE MIRROR***

Two flights of stairs were not a problem for Victor Chase. He could ascend two steps at a time without breaking sweat, without catching his breath, and, without *'knee burn'*. Victor was fit, in more ways than one. He had regularly attended the local gym until one Saturday morning, it dawned on him that he was a *'being'* of greater potential. His physical appearance was far superior to those others who frequented his workout domain. In other words, they were too ugly in his estimation to be sharing his space. So Victor Chase joined a private fitness club where he hoped to find *'like'* beauty.

Now Victor was groomed to a level of extreme measures, and a resounding *'yeah!'* from his hairdresser could testify to that. Hair style was part of Victor's *'look good regime'* and he spent many hours of his precious time sharpening his perfection. It was in the hairdressers that Victor became aware of the stares and the inquisitive eyes of strangers. At first, he considered that they were in fact taken with his presence and were in quiet awe of him. On second thought however, he decided that they were mocking him, obviously out of nothing more than pure jealousy. So Victor, much to his hairdresser's annoyance, chose to search for private services.

It wasn't particularly his body condition that proved to be Victor's main asset, concern, and paranoia; it was in fact his face. A vanity such as Victor's exceeded the norm and had occasionally, landed him in trouble with his fellow citizens - ugly ones - of course.

His self appointed posing grace and arrogance was enough to discourage friendships and relationships. His forthright frankness, more often than not, bordered on the side of rudeness. He did however, attract the classier female, the ones who were almost on par with himself, and, on the same wavelength. They were fine looking girls from good breeding stock as they say, and although Victor was initially captivated by the glamorous collection he was introduced to, none survived more than a one night stand. Victor was always repulsed by their lack of sustained beauty (usually as soon as the next morning), unlike Victor, who was always beyond handsome.

Each trip to and from the antiques shop where Victor worked in partnership with Ivan Bursken was becoming increasingly impossible. The street life and its inhabitants seemed to grow more and more grotesque with each passing day, and too much for Victor to bear. Fortunately, Ivan Bursken was rarely present in the shop, choosing instead to be out on buying expeditions, an arrangement which suited both men. The hunt for bargain antiquities was ceaseless, which pleased Victor, simply because Ivan Bursken was an ugly man.

It was amongst Ivan's most recent collection that Victor came across the mirror. The mirror itself was as unremarkable as any other mirror apart from the unique and ornate carvings of the framework, which drew Victor like a magnet. Victor liked '*pretty*' and loved '*beauty*'. This piece, Victor would have for himself. He propped the mirror on top of the writing desk by the window where there was enough natural light in which he could (*test*) admire himself. He found that his reflection was more than acceptable. Yes, Victor would take this mirror home with him. It would fit in nicely with the other splendid old furniture he had acquired. It would compliment not only his good looks, but the ambience of his rented flat in general.

Home was a one bedroom apartment of four, situated in the up market west end. The actual house was a well appointed detached property of Victorian age and character. Nowadays the once spacious accommodation had been divided into four lesser but still adequate units, the upper left, belonging to Victor Chase. The other residents who frequented the shared main staircase and hallway were alien to Victor and would remain so, for he was sure that they would be abhorrent to his eyes. Ugliness could be tolerated only out of necessity.

Like everyone else, Victor had to shop occasionally, for food and clothing. The food shopping was confined to a local grocers next door to his antiques business. It was small, but had an adequate stock of Victor's preferences. It had the added bonus of a reasonably pretty owner, though she wasn't beautiful enough to arouse thoughts of a sexual nature. Large supermarkets and retail outlets were a definite '*no, no, far too many uglies*'. To this end, Victor had to get most of his clothes by mail order which proved a slight inconvenience when procuring the exact size of fit. Because he had such a lovely face, Victor was particular about the clothes he

chose to set it off. However, the whole scenario was indeed a necessary evil, and Victor knew it was one initiated by his own vanity and paranoia.

The distance between his flat and his workplace was less than two miles, therefore, Victor mostly walked. This routine was only broken when the weather was excessively bad, then, he would flag down a city taxi-cab. At these times, he would try not to engage the driver for more than a brief moment. In Victor's estimation, the taxi business in general did not employ anyone of a pleasant demure, nor in retrospect would anyone who could be described as 'eye candy', be attracted to such a designated position.

So on this particularly, warm, spring evening as the sun descended behind the surrounding tall buildings, Victor Chase clutched the object of his desire, which was wrapped in brown paper, firmly under his arm, and hurried homeward. He was excited at the thought of his latest acquisition and he felt smug as he tightened his grip on the brown paper parcel, as if he had just stolen something away from any rival who might have aspirations on the prize. His journey home took less time than the norm, and he couldn't recall any of the ugly people he must surely have passed en-route, such was his attention on the mirror.

When he entered the hallway the ever present chill of gloom seeped into his being. It was always the same, an overwhelming sense of bleak despair filled the place and this only dissipated when he closed the door to his apartment behind him. It didn't really bother Victor, he rarely gave it much thought, it had become just one of those things. Despite his disregard for any explanation into the phenomenon (if phenomenon it was), he, however, never dallied in his quest to reach the sanctuary of his flat. He ascended quickly and noiselessly, hoping to avoid the neighbours yet again.

Victor was eager to unwrap his latest addition to the room but with great restraint, he forced himself to shower and prepare dinner first. The anticipation and later the final unveiling would be more rewarding. He searched the room for a fitting place of residence for the mirror and his gaze eventually fell upon the perfect spot, below the wall light, directly opposite the kitchen door. He grinned widely, yes, there.

Whether to hang on the wall or set atop the writing bureau was a decision

for after dinner.

Night crept silently on the old house and dark figures escaping the neon lights of the city centre quietly filtered through the streets and alleyways on their way home. Victor peeped down on them from his bedroom window and was thankful that the darkness hid their ugly faces from him. He had just showered and was now selecting something casual to wear. Once the steam had disappeared from the bathroom mirror, he had checked his fine features and cleaned his teeth even though he knew he was yet to eat. All was well with Victor's inspection and following appraisal.

After picking at his starter of forest mushrooms, Ice-berg lettuce and beetroot, he completed the less than appetising meal with a single piece of chicken breast that had been marinated in a white wine concoction of which only Victor knew the ingredients. To most, Victor's eating habits were as weird as his general outlook on life. But who would argue?

Even eating out with his so called '*beautiful people*' could be an occasion for much hassle and frustration for the diner, and in particular, the chef. However, Victor would not bend nor pander in the slightest to any resistance voiced against his judgment. He liked what he liked and that was that. Foods such as fish, certain spices, garlic or coffee, gave cause for bad breath, and in Victor's world, these could not be tolerated, hence, best left alone.

Victor saw such impurities as a formula for not only distasteful smells, but for bad skin and therefore, a potential for ugliness.

It was an eager Victor Chase who tore at the brown paper to reveal his recent purchase - the mirror. Once exposed, it did not dispel or disappoint his mood. His expectations were still notably high and he grinned his pleasure with schoolboy excitement. He hung the mirror on his wall directly above the writing bureau as first considered and rubbed his hands, gleeful of the result.

'Wonderful!' he exclaimed.

The reflection was perfect in every way, in fact even more than Victor could have hoped for. It showed every aspect of his amazing features, and with great emphasis on his smooth skin, rich colouring and hallowed countenance.

Victor was in love - with the mirror, with himself.

And so it went. Always after a boring and ugly filled day at work, Victor would

return to his flat and close the eerie atmosphere of the stairway behind him. Then, turning to the mirror, all of the disdainful moments spent in the world outside would fade into nothingness. He rejoiced in the beauty he found in the mirror. At times he was overwhelmed by the sheer ecstasy of his own radiance that glowed from its shining glass surface. He swore that his face was even lovelier than it had previously been, Victor hadn't given this any thought before, but could his face be even more beautiful than he had given himself credit for? Or, was it possible that his looks had actually been enhanced of late. No, that would be ridiculous, would it not? He gazed in to the mirror again as if searching for an answer, and finally decided that it was the quality of the mirror that gave him the highest resolution and reception that he deserved – perfection, whereas all previous mirrors had portrayed normality.

As the days flew by, Victor became further obsessed with the mirror. He could swear that he grew even more handsome (if that was possible) with every nights pruning ritual in front of the new magical glassware. At first the notion excited him and he revelled in his own seemingly, boundless attractiveness, but eventually it was to cause him some concern. Firstly, there were other mirrors, numerous mirrors, mirrors which reflected Victor as he had always known himself to be, reflections he instantly recognised, and knew to be true. Secondly, his friends (the few he still had) paid him no difference than the attention that was always bestowed on him. Could they then not see how much better his looks had become?

Strange?

On the fifth week since his new purchase had taken place, Victor was cooking, as per usual, nothing that amounted to more than a snack, when through the open kitchen door he caught a slight movement of shadow. Treading very warily into the lounge he looked around, and was met with nothing but his own figure, reflected in the mirror directly opposite. Victor relaxed a little and let out the long gasp of air that he had held trapped in cautious silence.

'Imagination,' he laughed, revealing the whitest and most even set of teeth. The face in the mirror grinned back. He stepped closer. How odd, he thought. Victor was certain that it was his face, no doubt about that, yet ..., it was again lovelier than he had remembered. It was his face, but not his face. Weird!

It was his near perfect features, was it not? Just something about the face that stared back he found disturbing. He wanted that face, he coveted that face, but then it was his face, was it not?

Victor suddenly felt silly. What the hell was going on? He was losing it; *get a grip Victor*. He laughed again and tried to dismiss his stupidity by returning to his cooking. However, every now and again, his eye wandered through to the living room, and invariably the mirror.

By mid Autumn, Victor was showing signs of anxiety and exhaustion and all because of the mirror, or more to the point, what was in the mirror. The face had become all empowering and Victor could not concentrate on his work. Victor now suspected that the face was substantially better looking than his own, especially now that he was showing signs of sleep deprivation. He desired the face, he wanted that face so badly that he would sit up for hours applying every product available in the hope of acquiring its like. The face haunted him, twenty-four, seven, and it received every consideration during his daily tasks. It consumed him and tore at his very existence. He must have a face like the one in the mirror. Only then would he feel complete.

One night as Victor gazed into the mirror, staring at the face, twisting his own to meet with the same beauty but failing dismally, he makes a wish. And sometimes, wishes come true.

On a crisp winters morning, Carl Benson brought the van to a halt with a crunch of underlying road ice. Fortunately, though, for Carl, the pavements proved to be less slippery than first expected. He moved his life's belongings eagerly, and without hassle to the door of his newly rented flat. He didn't own much, but it wouldn't matter as the apartment came with the added bonus of being partly furnished, thanks to the previous owner.

On each strenuous climb of the staircase, he did notice an unwelcome ambience in the landing and hallway, but once inside the flat, he was pleasantly surprised at its warmth. The place was fairly sparse of movables, but Carl was

happy to see at first glance that there was an adequate seating and table arrangement, some wall decoration, and a mirror.

Victor witnessed Carl Benson's arrival to the flat. He cried out in anguish but to no avail. When the men had arrived to remove some of Victor's most prized possessions, they had also ignored his calls for help. The new visitor behaved likewise. Victor tried to cry but no tears would form in his eyes. The inner despair engulfed him in a black cloud that he could not break through. Victor could only stare at the stranger as he came closer.

Carl Benson gazed into the mirror. 'Hey, lookin' good today,' he jokingly purred, and wondered off to collect some more of his stuff.

Victor watched him go, Victor on the other side of the glass, Victor Chase, the face in the mirror.

Taken from 'The House that Wept'

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