

Honorable Mention

Mirror Mirror

By Sharon A. Pruchnik

Imagine seeing yourself walk into a room. A flip of the heart, tightening in the chest. Pulled and pushed like two ends of a magnet. Roxy stood stoic for a moment and I wondered what was happening inside her.

“Baby.” My mother reached out with liquid arms, her clouded eyes swollen. The bed squeaked under her frail weight.

Roxy smiled and touched my shoulder walking past. Breath caught behind my tongue. The twin I hadn’t known existed until two weeks ago sat on the edge of the bed and wrapped her arms around my mother. Our mother. “Mummy,” she said.

They made some mewling sounds and my mother’s clinging arms turned to sinew. It was like watching her hug me, but she wasn’t. Something felt amiss.

There was no doubt we were the babies my mother had given up at birth. Same crooked tooth, sandy-colored eyes. Roxy even had the heart-shaped mole an inch below her part. She’d added auburn streaks to her frizzy hair and carried a few more pounds than me, but it was like looking in a mirror.

“Stand there, next to each other,” my mother said, pointing to the foot of her bed. “And turn on the light.” The nursing home’s rooms were generally dim, but a flick of a switch intensified the light and shadows. “It’s like God opened a book.”

I later learned the term “mirror twins.” What I had on my left Roxy had on her right. Opposites to each other. When we stood side by side, we must’ve looked like an inkblot from a Rorschach test. Symmetrical. One sliced into two.

Roxy laughed and turned to hug me. I knew that laugh; it wasn’t real. I didn’t hold on long for fear she’d feel my heart. She let go early too, saying, “You’re me.”

The air sucked right out of me then, like it belonged in her.

My mind went back to the slip of paper my mother had handed me the day she’d moved into the home. “Roxanna Grimes” in wiggly cursive. An address. “I found you but I couldn’t find her, ’til now.”

“She never told me I had a twin,” I said later over a plate of spaghetti. My mother had insisted Roxy stay at the house, the one I’d been living in with her for the last eight years.

“The call from that pastor was a surprise to me, too.” Roxy sliced fresh strawberries for the cheesecake she’d made for dessert. “I thought the something’s-missing feeling came from being adopted.” She placed the cheesecake and a cup of tea on my placemat. “I’m retired, my husband’s passed. I thought, ‘Why not?’”

She flicked through photos on her phone showing me a glistening pool, palm trees, rooms filled with overstuffed chairs.

“You’ve done better than me.” The cheesecake was clinging to my throat. “We’re kind of humble here.”

Roxy flipped through a few more photos before putting down the phone. “Jack spoiled me more than he should’ve. It’s just stuff.” She touched my spotty hand with hers. “You’re the one who made a difference.”

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Weeks passed with my mother fading daily. All her strength was saved for when she clutched my sister to her breast. “Baby,” she would manage with arid breath.

At the house, Roxy proved to be quite the gourmet chef. She sliced and diced her way through maple-glazed salmon and butterscotch pie. My mother’s kitchen had never seen anything more exotic than deviled eggs and ice cream in a cone. I fell victim to her charms.

“Try these?” Roxy held up a pair of navy-blue slacks as I struggled to zip up my pants.

“I’m ...” I hopped a little but the zipper wouldn’t budge. “Damn cheesecake.”

“Come.” Roxy led me to the dresser she’d been using, the one beside my mother’s bed. She pulled out a flowery top and silk scarf.

“Not today,” I decided. “You visit her while I take care of some things. Tomorrow I’ll visit so you can renew your driver’s license.”

Roxy looked at me. Through me, perhaps. “Okay.” She smiled so that the crooked tooth caught her lip. “We’ll each get a break.”

I dug through the attic that afternoon and bought a few things from CVS. I was even chopping celery for crabcakes when Roxy returned. “How was she?”

“Same. But look at you!” I wiped my hands on my sweatpants and tugged at the handkerchief on my head. “Not that. Cooking!”

“I can’t do it like you, but I’m trying.”

The crabcakes turned out mushy and the coleslaw too sour. “Great idea to take turns.” Roxy pushed the food around her plate. “I mean the visits. Not sure you should cook.”

I smiled the same smile I’d seen across the table for weeks. “Couldn’t agree more.”

The next day I hugged my mother tight and she hugged back. “So happy it’s you again.”

A whole new world formed around me. “You are?”

“Easier to talk. I mean about money and such.” She squeezed my hand.

When I got to the house, Roxy’s hair was flat and her gray roots emerged in the kitchen’s light. “The line at the DMV was out the door.”

“Let me help.” She didn’t look up when I took the knife. I chopped parsley and diced an onion into uneven mounds. “Your clothes fit me. Almost as if they’re mine.”

Roxy gave me a good look for the first time. “You’ve dyed your hair.”

“A few streaks.” I smiled at myself, but myself didn’t smile back.

“You changed your part. And your mole ...”

“It’s not real, sister. Not really real. Mummy didn’t notice, though, with her bad eyes. She was just happy to see me.” Light danced from the sharpened edge of the knife I was holding. “Her favorite.”

I wanted to be me again. Only me. It seemed so simple.

Roxy blinked her sandy-colored eyes.

Easy as sliced pie, even though it felt a bit like suicide.

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