

**INFINITY MINUS ...**

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...Four. I can still remember my fourth birthday like it was yesterday, which some might think odd, considering it's also the first birthday I can remember. The memory is as strong and vivid as ever though, not because of the presents, or the cake... But because of the mirror.

My memory of the day begins with the books and my father. I'd received several of those 'magic picture' books, books in which, if you looked at them a certain way, you'd see something entirely different than what was on the page. A seemingly random page of color would become a bird, or a butterfly, or even a sailing ship, so long as you looked at it just right.

It was easy for me to do, perhaps because, at the age of four, I didn't question the method. I simply unfocused my eyes as I was told to do and it worked. Perhaps my own easy mastery was what made my father's struggles seem strange. I watched him try and try, holding the books up to his nose and then slowly drawing them away, just as the instructions said, but to no avail. And the expression of frustration on his face must have seemed funny to my four-year-old self, causing me to laugh out loud. Which is when he hit me ... hard, right across the face with the back of his hand.

"Show some respect, ya little shit!" he yelled at me, as I stood there in shock from the impact. When I finally realized what had happened, how it hurt, both emotionally and physically, I ran crying to my bedroom, closed the door behind me, lay down on my bed, and cried myself to sleep.

I woke a few hours later. It was dark, and my parents had gone to bed. I got up, needing to pee, opened my bedroom door as quietly as I could, and snuck down the hall to the bathroom. When I turned on the light, something caught my eye — a flash off my mother's hand mirror, which for some reason caused me to forget my full bladder and reach out for that mirror. I don't remember if my mother had ever told me not to touch it before, as I wasn't afraid to pick it up. Staring back at me out of that mirror was my small, four-year-old face, one cheek still reddened and starting to bruise from my father's hand.

As I held that mirror and stared at the sad little boy who stared back at me, I slowly, unthinkingly, turned my back on the vanity until the bathroom mirror was behind me. At which point I noticed the reflection of the mirror behind me reflected in the smaller mirror in front of me. I didn't understand what I was seeing at the time, though for some reason each reflection after reflection after reflection reminded me of the 'magic picture' books, causing me to refocus my eyes. Which is when I saw it....

There, far, far away, in the many nested reflections, maybe four or so reflections in front of the furthest I could see, was a golden shape. Something that hadn't been there before I refocused my eyes. Something that glittered, or glistened, oddly. Something that *moved*.

That's when I dropped the mirror. The sound of it hitting the floor, the loud crash of breaking glass, startled me so much that I peed my pants. I couldn't help it; it just happened. And then my parents were there.

My father looked down at the broken mirror on the floor, now lying in a pool of my pee, then looked at me, the red I'd seen in his face earlier returning. He didn't say a word. He just slowly removed his belt, nodded at my mother to clean up the mess, grabbed me by the arm, and dragged me down the hall to my bedroom.

Which is the other reason I remember my fourth birthday like it was yesterday.

* * *

...Eight. I finally made it home from school, after cutting through neighborhood backyards and empty fields to lose the boys. They were older and took great pleasure in victimizing the younger kids at my school. I was an especially prized target, as I was a loner, a poor and unpopular boy with no friends and cheap clothes. They'd started picking on me during the bus ride home, flicking my ears, spitting on me. I knew there'd be worse to come once we got off the bus and away from the driver, so I leapt out the front doors as soon as they opened, running as fast as I could. I was lucky that day, knowing a few neighborhood shortcuts they didn't, but that didn't mean I'd be as lucky next time.

My parents weren't home, as both of them now worked. My father had lost his job, so Mom went back to work, waiting tables like she had before they'd married, and she continued to work after he finally got another job. It was my eighth birthday, and I was home alone, which was fine with me. My father's temper had gotten worse since he'd lost his job, and finding a new one hadn't improved it much. I knew other kids might have expected cake and ice cream, or luxurious gifts like bikes or toys, but I was happy to be home alone, safe from the boys from school and safe from my own father.

I went to the kitchen, found some bread and homemade jam (I knew better than to waste any of the store-bought peanut butter), and made myself a sandwich. I did treat myself to some milk, which I knew might get me in trouble later ("Drink the damn water, it's *free!*"), but it *was* my birthday. After I ate and cleaned every crumb off the table, I went to the bathroom.

When I turned on the light, something flashed out of the corner of my eye. I turned, saw my mother's hand mirror, and the memory of

my fourth birthday immediately came flooding back, causing me to flinch and turn away. Still, something else, something I didn't understand at the time (though I do now), caused me to turn back, to look at the hand mirror again. Against my own will, I found myself walking toward the bathroom vanity, lifting up the mirror, and turning my back on the vanity so that I was once again looking into infinity.

This time, I didn't need to try to refocus my eyes; it just happened. And there it, no, *he* was (I now recognized him as a *he*), a glistening yellow figure in the distance. He was closer this time, maybe eight or so reflections from the back, and his color reminded me of my own snot. As before, I could see he was moving, but this time I didn't drop the mirror. Maybe it was because I was older, or maybe it was because of the beating I'd received years before, but my hand continued to grip the handle of the mirror tightly.

As I stared, he sort of gestured to me, with something like an arm but not quite. His gesture caused me to focus my attention on his 'arm' and outstretched 'hand.' Suddenly, there in his 'hand,' something beautiful began to flicker, something I recognized from when my uncle lit his cigarettes. It was fire, something I knew adults made with matches. In my mind, I could hear him telling me, without words, that what he held out to me was good.

I walked out of the bathroom, still holding the mirror in front of me, not able to tear my eyes away from him or that which he held. The image in the mirror remained even after I'd walked away from the other bathroom mirror, something I didn't wonder about then and don't wonder about now, either (because now I *know*). I walked over to my father's desk, opened the drawer I'd seen him take matches from before, took out a matchbook, then walked back toward my bedroom. I don't remember putting down the mirror, nor do I remember striking a match, lighting the entire matchbook on fire, or throwing the flaming book of matches into my bedroom closet.

The next thing I recall from that day are my mother's screams and the smell of the fire extinguisher. She'd arrived home just in time. I think maybe the beating she gave me, which was at least as bad as the beating my father gave me when I was four, was meant to save me from another beating when my father got home. I'm not sure why I think that, as she seemed like she wanted to kill me at the time. She kept screaming about how I could've burned down the house, burned everything we owned, everything she and my father had worked so hard for. This time I tried to explain about *him*, about the mirror and how he'd shown me what to do, but that just made her even angrier. She said I was crazy, that I'd better stop saying such things, that she and my father didn't want people to think they had a crazy kid.

When my father got home, it was worse. There was no screaming like with my mom, at least not from my father. No, he was deathly quiet as he beat me, this time with an electrical cord, over and over and over. I think I must have eventually passed out. I woke up in my own bed, lying on my stomach in the dark. My mother had doctored and bandaged my back, but it still hurt bad. My mother took the next day off from work, so she could keep me out of school and in bed, afraid the cuts might bleed through my shirt. On the third day, I went to school wearing a long-sleeved shirt, on one of the hottest days of the school year, so no one would see the cuts. Seeing me sweat in that long-sleeved shirt just encouraged the older boys to torture me even more, so much so that I was almost

glad to get home.

There was a present waiting for me after school, on our back porch. It was a brand new bike, the first and only bike I ever owned. It was bright red, with polished chrome fenders. For some reason, I also noticed that it didn't have any mirrors on the handle bars, as the other kids' bikes had. I pretended to like it, pretended to be happy with the gift, because I knew anything else would anger my parents.

Still, I hated that bike almost as much as I hated the cuts on my back, cuts that would end up scarring permanently, a constant reminder of why I avoided mirrors.

* * *

...Forty. 'Happy birthday to me,' I thought to myself. My wife had been going out of her way all day trying to cheer me up. "Forty's just a number," she told me. "You're no different today than you were a year ago." I knew she was right, but still....

There'd been a party at the office, with a cake, black balloons, and everything. Then the party at home, just my wife and I. She'd made me a special meal (London broil, my favorite), had baked me another cake, had even surprised me with a special gift, an expensive children's toy I'd often mentioned wanting as a kid (an erector set).

Still, I couldn't help feeling depressed, as if half my life was over. A middle-aged man with a middle-aged life, a middle-aged wife, a boring job, a car, a mortgage.... Every day the same as the day before, every month, every year....

"Say!" My wife walked into my den with another package. "This one's from your mom! Isn't that odd?"

"Yes," I responded, not expanding further on the obvious. My mother had totally lost it when my father died, so I'd had her committed. I can't say I regretted it much, as I'd never been particularly close to her growing up. Still, the outright hatred she'd directed at me during the competency hearing, the names she'd screamed, made her the last person I'd expect to receive a birthday gift from. As a matter of fact, I hadn't visited her in over ten years, though I still paid the hospital bills.

I took the package from my wife and held it gingerly in my hands, as if it contained some sort of venomous snake I didn't want to anger. Then, against my own better judgment, I carefully removed the wrapping paper, opened the box within, and found ... a mirror.

It was my mother's old hand mirror, the one I hadn't broken, the one I'd never touched again after my eighth birthday and that my mother had told me never, ever to talk about. Against my own volition, I found myself reaching into the box, grasping the handle, standing up and walking toward the master bathroom. Once in the bathroom, I turned my back on the vanity, raised the hand mirror to eye level, and found myself almost face to, er, 'face,' with him.

This time he was much, *much* closer, maybe forty reflections closer, only a reflection of two from my own. The 'face' glistened just as I remembered, the shade of yellow was exactly the same, and this time I could see his 'eyes.' As soon as I looked into those eyes, I felt

myself falling, falling, downward into those two glittering pinpoints of black, until I was enveloped in the inner darkness that was him. It felt so good, so right, being there with him. His thoughts seemed to be those of a caring father who, unlike my real father, only wanted what was best for me. I listened to his 'voice' once again, as I had so many years before, when I was eight. His voice counseled me, told me how I could improve myself, what actions I needed to take to become so much more than I was.

I don't know how long I lingered there, with him. All I know is that, when I finally arose from that comfortable darkness, finally reopened my eyes, I was no longer holding the mirror. I didn't recall putting it down, but there it was on the night stand. The other thing I noticed was the blood ... so much blood, all over my hands. I looked around the room, the bedroom my wife and I shared, and immediately noticed her crumpled body, lying at my feet in a pool of blood.

I felt my knees giving out on me, felt myself falling down by her side. She was definitely dead — violently, irreversibly dead. I found it hard to breathe, felt my chest tightening up, as if bands of steel were closing around my chest. I also felt a presence, someone else in the room.

I looked up and saw him looking down at me from the bedroom mirror. Apparently I didn't need the other mirror any more. He and I were now at the same level, in the same reflection. I avoided meeting his eyes this time, but I could still hear his voice in my head, telling me about all the other things he could teach me. This was just the beginning, he said. There was more, so much more.

I tried to shut out the voice, tried not to listen, but I knew it would no longer be possible. We now shared the same reflection and were beginning to share the same thoughts, as well. My life, my future, was lying on the floor before me and hovering behind a single reflection in the mirror behind me.

I forced myself to walk toward the bedroom window, to turn the latches, to slide it open and remove the screen. All the while, I could hear him pleading with me, a loving father-figure who only wanted to help me, guide me, make me a better person. As I leaned out of the window, the message changed, became more demanding, angry, until it didn't sound all that different from the voice of my real father.

Which made it that much easier for me to fall head first from my own second-story bedroom window.

* * *

I now sit in this room, day after day, night after night, with only him for company.

This is where they placed me after the trial, the hearings. The doctors say I'm ill, schizophrenic, they call it. It's not my fault, they tell me. They talk of chemical imbalance, of treatments and cures. They don't understand.

He does. We are one now, alone together in this padded room. He continues to try to counsel me, to teach me and control me. I let him, just as obediently as I swallow the doctor's treatments. What

good would it do to fight or argue, after all?

So I sit, I listen, I obey, and I count my two greatest blessings:

That the fall paralyzed me from the neck down, and that my room is completely free of mirrors.



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