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Refracted Memories

Renice Desrosins

It's impossible to know when it began, or why it started in the first place, but from the time I was little I'd have these . . . flashes. No, not flashes, they were more like *moments*. Moments that came and left so quickly, it'd be years until I realized what had happened—what was *still* happening. I was accustomed to the stagnant fog in my mind; it startled me when the smoke fell around my feet, a mirrored image of myself the only thing I could see.

It didn't matter how young I was the first time the smoke fell.

It didn't matter that other kids wouldn't see their own mirrors for years. And it didn't matter how angry I was looking back at it all.

All that mattered was the stillness of the moment, when I found my gaze locked on the whiskey of my eyes. Not a single thought spared to the large, vertical cracks in my mirror that split my image into three separate parts.

Who are you? a voice echoed.

I'm still trying to figure out to whom the voice belonged, but to the child I was, the answer seemed simple.

I was three different people and never all at once.

The sentiment wasn't literal, though on most days it may as well have been.

When I glanced at the split in the mirror to my left, I saw the Desi side I embraced at home. This image of myself was the first one I knew, and funnily enough it was the first to be distorted. I was used to the butter

that lingered on my fingers while I tore into fluffy white pieces of naan. People danced in the warm air of summer as the familiar rhythm of “Jhoom Barabar” spilled out the windows of Amma’s house.

Amma.

It was odd I never questioned why we called her that.

I knew India was home to thousands of dialects and languages, and most Indians—my mom included—grew up speaking at least two. Though my Hindi and Tamil weren’t as refined as my mom’s, I retained enough to know the Tamil word “Amma” meant *mother*, not grandmother. So why didn’t we ever call her *Dādi* instead?

The Hindi term was more accurate to her role in my life and my cousins’, and since Tamil was hardly spoken by the adults to the kids, the change in language would have been more familiar.

Still, I never thought to ask.

Maybe that was the problem.

Immersed in the realm of lenghas and Bollywood, it was hard to see the many inconsistencies in my upbringing. It wasn’t about Amma’s title, it was how small, harmless moments like these groomed my instincts to *normalize* the world’s distortions, not question them. I’m not saying I’m thankful for the ignorance I had, but if my childhood self could understand the weight of what she did, she would have seen how close to breaking the mirror really was.

At the age of twenty-one it was easier to see the hundreds of thin fissures that littered the glass. When my fingers brushed against them, the voices of my family rang loud.

*Don’t stay in the sun, you don’t want to get **dark**.*

*It doesn’t matter what you do, you’re not Indian, you’re just **half**.*

*My husband told me he would never want to be **Black**.*

My eyes locked on a single fissure that flowed and scattered across the other reflections.

Despite my best interest, I dragged my fingers along the fracture.

As my finger moved, the voices shifted from mom’s family to my white classmates and their parents. This time, since the fissure was thicker, I could recall the memories that came with it.

When I was told being Black meant I couldn’t be with a white boy, I remembered the evening rays of the sun danced outside my classroom, before nodding oblivious agreement.

When I was cast as a lead in my school's rendition of *Cinderella*, I remembered how I chose to focus on my lines instead of the mother that called my Black hair sloppy.

When I said the phrase, "I wish I were white," I remembered how nonchalantly those words left my lips. I remembered how I repeated them again and again. I remembered how I didn't stop until freshman year of high school. And I remembered how no one took two seconds to stop and give me *any reason* to think otherwise.

My fingers, not even halfway across the center panel, trembled as I removed them from the middle image in the mirror. Tears of salt pooled in my eyes and burned as nature begged me to let. Them. *Fall*.

My heart *thumped* and *thumped* against the chamber in my chest, while anger and shame pulsed through my veins, frying nerve endings one after the other. I focused my mind on the air in my lungs. Morbid curiosity urged me to look up, to stop observing the fractured glass beneath my finger and take in the person reflected before me.

I refused.

Instead, my eyes glared at the bottom of my reflection.

I didn't need to look up. I already knew what I'd see. The person in the center would be everything I'd allowed the world to convince me I wanted.

She'd be tall, hyper-feminine, and, most importantly, she'd be white.

I saw droplets hit the floor before I realized I was crying.

That girl wasn't me, and ever since I was little, my heart resented the truth that the whiteness I craved never existed in my veins. My soul cried out, powerless against the image that poisoned my thoughts. The aching wails boomed and echoed in the walls of my mind, building and building until I resented myself. Internalized racism clawed at my heart, baiting me to bleach the color of my skin.

It wasn't as outrageous as some believed.

The option of skin bleaching came and left. It didn't linger long. I was appalled I entertained it.

My brown skin. My beautiful, melanated, brown skin was nothing but a *hindrance* to my younger self. Though my mother was not passive in the blessing of my pigment, I owe my Blackness to the strength of my Haitian father.

For the first decade of my life, my mother's side, my Desi side, was the primary essence that flowed through my veins. The whiteness I strived for

came a close second. My Blackness was a distant third. My father had three brothers, none of whom were married or had kids. My mother was one of seven, all but one were married and had kids. The imbalance made it difficult to connect with anything besides India, and the lack of Black women in my life didn't help.

With my father, though I loved him, there was little I could connect to, so he did what he did best.

He gave me elements of *him* and the freedom to find *myself*.

It didn't change the fact that he and I lived different lives. He was born and raised in a country where he embodied beauty. The concepts of racism were foreign entities. He wasn't at fault for how I resented being Black. Neither was I.

"It's not my fault," I whispered to myself, fingers curling into fists by my side.

Through the corner of my eye, I could see the furthest reflection. The epitome of my Blackness represented in full. The image wasn't clear. The brown-skinned girl reflected was dull and lifeless, and bore the scars of my abuse.

I hated what I did to her.

What I did to myself.

The fissures on her panel were impossible to miss. Shards broke in so many places, I was scared she'd fall apart any second. Slivers of platinum coated many sharp edges, a piss-poor attempt at the art of kintsugi. I thought by emulating the technique used by Japanese artisans, I could follow their philosophy and find beauty in what I perceived to be the imperfections of my Blackness.

I stopped when I found more cracks than platinum to spare.

By habit, my eyes searched for hers.

Fire unexpectedly sparked around her irises. It left as soon as it came, and I wanted it *back*.

In the stillness of the moment, I found my gaze locked on the whiskey of my eyes, every thought given to the large, vertical cracks in my mirror that split my image into three separate parts.

Who are you? A voice echoed.

I didn't care to figure out whose voice it belonged to. To the child I was the answer seemed simple, but to the adult I've become the answer was clear.

I am me, and that is enough.

My father gave me his elements, and as my fist collided with the glass, I was thankful strength was one of them.

My knuckles hammered away at the false images I'd created. They were nothing more than jagged desires. I would not heed their distortion any longer.

Pain flared up as shards tore at my skin, but the ambition in my conviction helped me see through it.

I'd break my mirror for the kid doubting the beauty of their skin.

I'd break my mirror for the kid who felt unloved by their cultures.

I'd break my mirror for the kid whose own mirror broke long before they even knew it was there.

I'd pound away at the mirror until it *shattered*.

Then I'd melt down the pieces and forge a reflection I was proud of.