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House of Mirrors

When my cousin Daniel was five he got lost in the House of Mirrors at Rye Playland. The rest of the park was so loud, everyone on top of each other, screaming, laughing, crying, the jerks and pulls and cranks of the different machines. We got cotton candy, but then Daniel dropped his, we got hot dogs but they were out of mustard. Daniel was interested in the super slide until he found out how itchy the potato sack was. Then finally, between The Whip and the nacho bar, Mom found something that Daniel might actually like, the House of Mirrors.

He'd always enjoyed his own reflection. He loved stealing my Mom's phone and just staring into the camera, making funny faces, scrolling through all the archaic filters of the early 2000s, the black and white, the multi-colored, the multifaceted ten of yourself displayed over and over. When I got my first phone, Daniel spent an hour looking at himself on Snapchat. Dog ears, heart eyes, butterflies cascading out of his open mouth.

"He'll enjoy this," Mom said, handing ten-year-old me the tickets, "I don't think I can stay on my feet much longer. Take him, keep him close, if anything goes wrong I'm right outside."

Pregnant with my sister Casey, Mom's stomach was large and her ankles were bloated. I waved her off to the nearest bench, grabbing Daniel's hand. It wasn't really a house, but a tall skinny outpost with bright red shutters and dark looming walls. The line was short, the ticket taker was bored, chewing gum, and watching Gangnam Style on her phone. Daniel stared up in awe at her dyed black hair, her lip piercing, and the Pikachu tattoo on her collarbone. This I believe is when he first found his love for tattoos, first began drawing on himself.

"Tickets," she said, and I handed them over, the two bubble gum pink tickets falling into her hand. The girl paused as she looked between me and Daniel, "kids under eight usually have to go in with an adult."

I looked back at my mom, Daniel still and oblivious to the conversation, staring at her collarbone like Pikachu was some sort of deity. The girl followed my gaze and sighed.

"Look kid, just don't do anything stupid," she said, sitting back on her stool.

Daniel giggled at the word. I rolled my eyes, shushing him and pushing towards the door.

"And don't let go of the little brat's hand," she yelled.

My cousin Daniel became my brother Daniel a year later, when he was six and I was eleven. The year his mother died from breast cancer and his father jumped off a bridge.

Mom bought bunk beds; I got top, Daniel got bottom. The room, for the first month, was filled with tubs of legos and army men, the walls were blue, his sheets covered in dinosaurs and racecars. We tried to play baseball in the backyard, tried to throw a football in the park across the street. By October we realized Daniel wasn't really an army men or legos kind of guy, and he didn't mind baseball, but once he got the glove on he wouldn't take it off for the rest of the day. He liked the way the leather felt on his hand the way it sat in his lap as he pushed mashed potatoes around on his plate, a weight on his chest when he laid down in the neighbor's garden.

Daniel's real interest was books, coloring books, chapter books. That fall he finished the entire Magic Treehouse

series, moving on to Roald Dahl right afterward. There's still a book in our old room, *James and the Giant Peach*, dogeared on almost every page, notes written in the margins. He used to stay up late reading it—I'd turn off the lights, he'd turn them back on. I'd turn them off again and he'd get up and go read in the bathroom, sit in the tub until the sun rose, curled into the fetal position, like he was waiting for a bomb to drop.

The room then slowly became Daniel's. The walls were covered in drawings, a collage of black and blue crayon. In later years, there'd be fine pencil sketches of people he'd met at restaurants and movie theatres, and other things that interested him like salt shakers and newspaper stands. He began collecting small ceramic animals; pokémon, bible figures, little dragon statuettes. He kept them all in a backpack under his bed, prepared to grab in case of a midnight fire. One day he handed me a large black sharpie and asked to write his name on it. Then he asked me to write it again, over and over *so they know it's mine*

Daniel gripped hard onto my hand, trying to pull his feet up off the floor, the soles of his hand-me-down red and white Sketchers already peeling away, now stuck to the sticky linoleum floor of the House of Mirrors. I think I wore those shoes before him, his shirt too, a light blue, the logo of my older summer camp on the back.

I let Daniel lead us around the first corner, only to hit a dead end. I stopped but Daniel kept walking, leaning his head up against the mirror, letting the sweat from his forehead stain the glass. I quickly pulled him back, staring at him through the mirror, with his heavy breath and his stupid smile. Mirrors. People liked to say Daniel and I were mirror images of each other. Pale skin, freckles, the same haircuts, straight brown strands cut into the shape of a bowl, tickling the insides of our ears in a way that kept our hands at the ready to push it back.

"Come on," I said, pulling Daniel the other way, my grip on his hand loosening.

Daniel would never go to college, he'd barely finish high school. Smart in some ways, dumb in others, he failed geometry two years in a row but got a 5 on his AP Lit test in 11th grade. Mom told him he should major in English, Daniel shrugged, saying how he would choose instead to reject standardized education, Casey laughed, Mom gave me a look that said 'they're crazy aren't they.' Daniel wasn't crazy, he was serious, he read *War and Peace* for fun then proceeded to read it again but this time baked out of his mind, wondering if the marijuana would make the experience any different. When he asked if I knew where to get acid and crack cocaine I told him to smoke some more weed and wait for the answer to come to him. Daniel walked away, muttering about the importance of critical analysis and killjoys. I smiled. Daniel was a funny guy sometimes but his words were always sincere.

Halfway through the House of Mirrors, we entered a larger room that had the same linoleum floor but also a low hanging ceiling. In just a few years I'd have to bend my head as I walked through, but at the moment Daniel and I fit pretty well. The walls were still mirrors, but the kind that made your body look different, like a Dr. Seuss Character. There were a few other kids in the room, middle schoolers, they paid us no mind, sitting in the corner sucking down slurpees and peeling apart blue and red sour strings. While Daniel stared at the mirrors I stared at the kids, wrapped up in a conversation about the summer reading assignment.

The girl that only read half of "The Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen spotted me staring. She looked me up and down as I tried to turn away, quickly searching for Daniel's hand grabbing nothing but air. "What are you looking at?" the girl asked, and the rest of the kids looked up, all of them staring at me now.

"Hey, weren't there two of you?" a different girl asks, I looked over my shoulder confused, "your little brother or something."

My little brother or something.

In the months after Daniel moved in we realized that he didn't like talking to most people, just Casey and me. He barely talked to Mom, usually using one of us as a go-between. He talked to my Dad every once and awhile, usually right after he got home from work, still in his work clothes, grease and coveralls, and steel-toed boots. Daniel liked things that were worn in, he liked running his fingers over my Dad's callused hands. When Dad wasn't in a patient or caring mood, he'd give Daniel his toolbox and let him examine everything carefully. Mom hoped this meant Daniel might take up carpentry in the future. He was only six but she was already worried about his future, about what he'd do, if he'd be dependent on someone his whole life. Dad never pinned any hopes on Daniel's interest.

"I don't worry much about Daniel's future," he said, we were at a diner a few blocks from the house, Dad had

ordered a large blueberry waffle and a side of bacon. As he spoke I watched him cut the waffle into small square bites.

It was a Sunday morning; Mom, Daniel, and Casey were all at church. I'd never gone to church, and Dad hadn't been since I was born. He wanted to raise me without religion, I never found out why, but it was something he and Mom fought about regularly. Dad never budged, and from then on Sundays had been ours.

"You don't?" I asked, pouring sugar packet after sugar packet into a cup of black tea. Dad wouldn't let me order coffee till my twelfth birthday, but I wanted to start getting used to bitter things.

"Daniel knows what he wants," he said, drizzling syrup over his waffle, "and he has a reason for everything he does."

My eyebrows pinched together and I leaned back in my seat, fingers drumming on the smooth black countertop.

"I worry more about you, Caleb," Dad said, taking the first bite of his waffle.

"Me?" I asked. I hadn't understood that. I was a smart kid, that's what all my teachers said. I was smart, I got As. I played well with other kids at recess, always waiting my turn, never rushing to the front of line or causing a ruckus like some of the others. The teachers said they'd never seen a more well behaved eleven-year-old boy. I would go places, they said. And they were right, but so was my Dad.

"You do what you have to, not what you want," Dad said.

He was already a quarter of a way through his waffle, so I figured I should start on my food. Picking up my fork, I began the meticulous process of portioning out home fry to bacon to egg, making sure I had just enough of each with every bite.

"I worry you'll get trapped," Dad said, his waffle more than halfway gone now, "in an unpleasant situation, in a life you don't want."

I looked out the window, at Boston Post Road, at the tall point spires on the French-American school across the street. Dad finished his waffle and moved to flag down a member of the wait staff.

"Daniel doesn't get trapped," Dad said, "even when you think he is, he finds a way out."

Dad waited for me to say something but I stayed quiet. Sipping my tea, eating my eggs. He sighed, leaning back in the booth, folding his arms.

Daniel's first tattoo was a peach on his left knee. He did it himself, on a Friday night during his senior year, in the same bathtub where he used to read books as a kid. Mom was away on a work trip and it was just Daniel and Casey home alone. Casey found him in boxers and an old wrestling hoodie, holding a thin needle up to his leg. She called me instead of Mom but by the time I got home there wasn't much to do except sit down next to him and let him etch a skull and crossbones into my ankle.

Mom says that when Dad died it felt like the world stopped turning. For me, it was the opposite. Dad's death was the first domino in a string of many. Mom had spent the last three days surrounded by extended family, in the midst of funeral planning. Every five seconds my aunts were asking her something, about flowers or appetizers. My uncles were sorting through Dad's garage, bringing out box after box of tools, arguing over who gets to take the power saw home and who has to bring our crappy lawnmower to the pawnshop—they were getting us a new one, a tribute to Dad or something.

Daniel and I didn't have any black formal wear. Our closet was filled with Columbia blue button-ups and tan khakis, proper flag day concert attire. They bought us black shirts with itchy collars, Daniel couldn't keep his hand off it through the whole service. We both got rashes, small red angry bumps that took days to fade. A week later I went back to school with a ring of scabs around my neck and a note from my mother.

Ninth grade was a fever dream of geometry proofs and babysitting and lacrosse practice. Every once and awhile amongst the chaos someone would ask me how I was and I would say fine, and they'd raise their eyebrows and nod and I'd return to whatever menial task I was doing. Teachers would whisper to each other—*he's handling it so well*—they'd send my Mom emails—*we're so glad to see him moving forward* Meanwhile, fourth grade Daniel was just the opposite, getting in trouble at school, distancing himself from the few friends he had, the little sleep he got each night diminished. He got caught drawing on the lunch tables at school, outlines of Pikachu and Squirtle. A hammer and a noose.

I often stayed up with him, sat with him in the tub. Let him doodle on me rather than the old white porcelain. I'd read aloud *Catcher and The Rye*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antigone*. I spent weeks telling him about Ancient Rome, my history textbook propped up next to the shampoo and conditioner. I recounted the story of brothers Romulus and Remus, children of Mars, cast out of their home as children, raised by the wolf god Lupus. I glossed over the part where Romulus killed Remus, instead, telling him that the two brothers grew up to rule Rome together.

It didn't cross my mind that he'd learn the truth in a few years, sitting in the same classroom I had, with the same textbook. In just a few more years he would walk across the same stage as me and that's where we parted ways. A year later Daniel found himself at a tattoo parlor in the Bronx, living in an apartment in Yonkers. And I was fresh out of grad school living at home in our old bedroom—camped out on the top bunk. I spent my days half-heartedly filling out resumes and turning pages in old family photo albums. I took Casey to soccer practice and the mall. When I couldn't sleep there was no one there to stay up with. No one to sit with, no one drawing on my arms. I often found myself sitting alone in the bathroom for hours at a time. I tried calling him once, it was four AM on a Tuesday morning. All I got was the dial tone.

I spent twenty minutes in the House of Mirrors, searching. Feeling my way through, turning around the same corner over and over again. I kept telling myself he'd be just around the corner, just around the corner entranced by the mirror, face pressed to the glass. He never was. After a while I sat down and gave up, dragging my hands through my hair, untying and retying the torn laces of my shoes.

When I stood up again and found my way out, ready to own up to my mistake, to tell Mom Daniel was lost forever, I saw him, sitting with the ticket taker, playing with a cootie catcher, picking seven then five, listening diligently to his fortune. He wasn't smiling, but I could tell he was listening. I walked over and sat next to Mom—relieved and confused at the same time, like I had missed out on something important.