

MIA RAMAGE

The Collector's Shop

If asked, I couldn't pinpoint where my childhood had ended and the ugliness had started. Looking back on the winding tunnel of my life, it seemed the ugliness had always been there, curled up in my crib, waiting to make its presence known. I know that this cannot be true, and there was a time that I knew a happy life, but like all tragedies, it comes to the point where any joyous memories are sharpened by the pang of knowing the sweet will soon sour.

What I can tell you definitively is that the pervasive ugliness changed its form the day I stumbled across the Collector's Shop. Perhaps stumbled is not an apt lexical choice here; I doubt there was any chance that I found the shop rather than it found me. Wrapped in my thoughts that harsh December morning, I didn't notice my feet had brought me before a small, crooked, blackened building, only breaking out of my reverie by the perimeter of peace the building granted me. On the bustling streets, crammed with frantic shoppers, the shop stood untouched by the people around me, who moved past without so much as a glance towards it.

Enticed by the serenity, I stepped in, feeling the biting cold subside by the blast of heat as the door opened, and the bell rang out with shining clarity. The door swung shut behind me and trapped me in the bizarre, old-fashioned room. The closing of the door had blocked out any natural light, the grimy windows doing nothing more than filtering the light and distorting it to the heavy brown that seemed to touch every part of the room. The room itself was cluttered; tens of shelves stood in seemingly random angles, swollen

with overflowing pieces of paper and small objects that the half-light didn't want to refract for me to depict clearly. All the debris left only a straight path forward to the front of the shop, where the figure stood waiting for me.

The impression of him I will impart to you is the most honest I can give, as his features were unremarkable to me at first. He had greying hair parted down the middle, a short, yet spindly frame, a comical eyeglass balancing off one eye and magnifying its pupil like a squirming black beetle, giving the impression his face was lopsided. What caught my attention the most were his fingers, slender and sharp, drumming over the countertop with anticipation as I stepped forward.

"Hello," I smiled, dipping my head awkwardly to him.

"Hello," he replied, watching me flounder in the middle of his shop. "Is there anything in particular you're looking for?"

I approached his countertop, the only clear space in the shop, with only a rusted till, a shapeless bust, and an erect object cloaked in a mirror. "I'm looking for—" I paused, struggling to come up with a suitable response.

"You don't know," he finished for me. "It's quite alright, quite alright. I often find in this sort of business that's the kind of customer I attract."

"And what business might that be?" I asked, looking around. "I didn't see a sign outside."

The rate at which his fingers drummed the tabletop picked up. "A tricky question, that. Would you like to see for yourself?"

I hesitated, and the air around me stopped moving, tendrils of light creeping back towards me and the sound of the man, or as I came to know him, the Collector, becoming hazy and not dissimilar to the feeling of being underwater. Oh, had I never added my assent to his offer! With that one head movement, everything was brought back into focus again, and I gave my approval for one of his deft fingers to flick the covering off that object, for a screaming silver to brace my eyes.

I flinched away from the object, seeing it to be a mirror, meticulously polished and gleaming smugly, taunting me.

"Look into it."

"I'd really rather not."

"Are you scared of a mirror?"

My smile trembled. "A little, yes."

He wet his lips and pushed the mirror closer to me. "Look into it."

My eyes were drawn downwards, and a slight shudder passed over me at the sight of my own face looking back up at me. There was the ugliness, the poison that had been in my cup with every moment. And in this mirror, every fault seemed magnified; the thinness of my pale lips, the crooked overlap of my teeth, the wrinkles and marks over my face, the bulbous end of my nose, the watery, bloodshot eyes that sat asymmetrical above the broken bridge of my nose.

And then, with another flick of his finger, I saw my nose straighten, the skin smoothen, the teeth shine brilliantly white, every wrong righted in an instant.

I only looked up to see if it was real, see my own happiness reflected in another's face. The Collector was indeed smiling at me, his eyes, like my own, glimmering at the image in front of him. I looked back to the mirror, tears stinging my eyes and rolling down my face when, as I turned back to greet the welcome vision, I saw the mirror image had reverted to its original visage. Only now, the pain of the misshapen truth had been multiplied tenfold, because I had seen true beauty, felt the surge of happiness it carried, knew what it was to have had it and to have lost it. Enraged, I had lunged at the mirror, picking it up and shaking it, hands threatening to crack the sides, as if my anger could bring back the mirage.

The Collector watched the outburst with nothing more than a polite 'o' shape forming on his lips. I set the mirror back down, turning to him in anguish, a shivery, weak-legged sickness overcoming me. "How did you do that?"

"The real question," he said, "is would you like it to be real?"

"You can make that happen?"

He cocked his head, his brow knitting together. "With your permission, of course I can."

I grappled in my bag, pulling out a purse and proffering it to him. "How much?"

"For the procedure? Oh, I won't be taking your money."

The events of what happened in that shop are hazy at best, often only coming back to me in moments of lucidity, but I have always remembered the way I looked at him in that moment, the thought in my head that stood above the rest and proclaimed; *if saints truly are real, this man must be one of them.*

He produced a pen and a piece of paper with a flourish, laying them down flat for me to sign, which I did eagerly, the keen whining need to see what I had seen in the mirror drowning out any potential misgivings. When I had signed, and the paper had been tucked away, he dragged around a small chair and had me sit, handing me the mirror. I looked in it without fear, knowing soon the apparition and the reality would be one and the same.

Taking the mirror from me and facing it away, he asked, "What would you like me to do first?"

I thought deeply, about what ailed me most, and settled on, "The skin. Change my skin."

He gave a small bow which triggered a high-pitched giggle to rise up my throat. "As the lady commands."

My eyesight was pulled inwards as one of his long, curled fingers stretched just above my line of sight and rested on my forehead, tracing lightly over the skin and curving until it rested under my cheekbone.

I felt it come off. All the blemishes, the spots produced by my natural oil, the scar above my eyebrow from a drunken night out, the marks from teenage acne which had never fully healed, the bumps and imperfections I couldn't explain, all of it lifted. But there was something else with it. The wrinkles on my forehead, which I had long abhorred, were peeled away as if they were nothing, and with them the nights of studying that had earned me everything I had wanted, the glorious days spent tanning in the bright, tropical sun, every single memory and part of me that had created those small little lines. The laugh lines that coated my eyes, the corners of my lips, the details created by years of happiness were snatched up and devoured in a few seconds and replaced by a blank canvas.

When his hands lifted from my face, I sat, numbly, watching him handle the skin I had shed as if it were the most delicate thing in the world and arrange it on the empty bust, the shadow of my face now

hanging on another head as if it were a mask.

He turned back towards me and smiled. "There. Don't you feel better?"

I placed a trembling hand on my cheek, a smooth silkiness sliding over it, and I nodded.

"What next?"

"Next?"

He picked up the mirror again, this time holding it in front of my face, and I saw creamy, perfect skin, surrounded by jarringly distorted features. He moved the mirror away again. "With potential like yours, don't let it go to waste. What next?"

"My mouth," I begged. "Fix it, please."

He smiled at me, moving his face closer to mine, bringing a finger to my lower lip and parting my mouth slowly. I sucked in at the proximity, and as he began his work I felt him drain off the other times I had been in this position, from my first kiss at nineteen, when I thought I would die from the explosion of emotions, and that same joy mirrored in countless other partners throughout the years. The lips that had first kissed my mother, my father, that had braced the cheeks of my friends, lay limply in the hand of the man before me.

I tried to speak, but he quieted me fervently. "Stay quiet, darling. Those lips need time to settle." Without another word from me, he placed my lips on the bust to join my skin. He looked at his handiwork, satisfaction radiating from him. "Very good. You're shaping up nicely."

I didn't know whether he was speaking to me, or the mask of my face that lay on his desk.

"Teeth next, I think. Don't you?"

Through my new mouth, I managed to say my first word. "Yes."

"Little bit trickier, this one," he said, rolling up his sleeves until they reached his elbow. Without warning, he reached into my mouth, and a scream erupted from me as he set my gums on fire, my mouth awash with the metallic sting of blood as one by one, my teeth were torn from me and rattled on the countertop. He sang merrily between my screams as he counted them, until I fell into silent agony, slimy tendrils hanging from the stumps of my mangled gums.

I looked forlornly at my teeth on the counter like they were fallen friends. The pain of my wisdom teeth growing in, the excitement from having my adult teeth, the words I had spoken with them, the foods I had bitten and sustained myself with, every proclamation of love or happiness sitting before me.

“Don’t cry,” the Collector warned. “It makes the whole process so much more complicated. Have to work around the tears, you know. Of course, I could always block your tear ducts. Or remove them entirely. Then again, the eyes are a tricky science. Might just leave them till the end, eh?”

I moaned, a deep, guttural sound racked with pain, the kind of sound only the most wretched beings have been accursed with hearing.

He slapped his hand to his forehead, and I saw rivulets of my blood leap from his hand. “Silly me! You’ll be wanting your teeth back. Well, not back. You understand I can’t do that. Your new teeth, of course.” He ran his hand over my mouth lazily, and I started in pain and lurched forward to be sick as something pushed through my gums and thirty sharp little heads began to wriggle through.

“Ah,” he said. “I might have mentioned that. See, it’s best to let your new teeth grow in. Much healthier for them, you know. But don’t fret, don’t fret, they’re faster growers than their human counterparts. No less painful, but they should be ready in a few minutes.”

I clutched my mouth, feeling as though I was giving birth thirty times simultaneously. The sharp ends moved towards each other, a bee sting to my mouth every second.

The Collector had finished arranging my teeth behind my old lips, and in an unparalleled horror I recognised the bare bones of my face he had shaped. I recognised it was far from ugly, and perhaps never had been. He strode over to me with more confidence as I writhed and hissed. “No point waiting around for the teeth to grow out. Shall I do the nose while we wait?”

I prayed and fought for my protests to leave my mouth, but I didn’t have control of the new shape and could only make the whimpers of a wounded animal.

“No queries? Right you are, then,” he said, and with unreserved glee, settled his thumb and forefinger over the tip of my nose, and

tore it clean off.

Blood was pouring out of the hole in the middle of my face where my nose had been, trickling from my mouth, pushing against my sensitive skin. I felt my chest constrict and my heart harden to stone, every breath I had taken through my nose suddenly expendable and pointless. And there I was, choking and gasping for air I couldn't reach and yet somehow, still alive.

He yanked my hair back to examine my ears, and I realised I couldn't feel his breathing on my neck, nor could I see the movement of his chest, because he simply wasn't breathing. Then I realised neither was I.

"I know we didn't discuss your ears, but with a little reshape they really could be something. And you did sign away your face, so really they're mine to take."

Take them he did, and with them he took the sound of my child's first word, the first time anyone said, 'I love you,' the music notes that had greeted me, of laughter, every little thing I had heard since birth. He took it all, and when he soothed me as he replaced my nose and ears, I heard nothing. It was as though my ears had been adjusted to a different station, one that no one else but the Collector could control. His voice was as inviting and soft as ever, only now I could understand he was speaking to me in a language not made for humans. When he ran moisture over his lips this time, I noticed the split in his tongue.

"Feels so much better to speak in my native tongues. You don't mind, do you? Obviously you don't, it's your language to speak now too. It's just so liberating to be your true self, I find. Now," he said, snapping from his jaunty demeanour back into a cool detachment as he examined my mutilated face, "not much left for me to do. I have to say, you've been one of my best clients yet. So agreeable. Gold star for you." He pondered, his hand stroking his chin. "I suppose all that's left is the eyes, really. I promised you I'd leave them until the end."

My mouth felt overcrowded with teeth, and even my tongue lying at the base of my mouth caused me immense pain, but I managed to croak out a single, "No."

"No?" he repeated, cocking his eyebrow. "Oh, well, if you insist.

I'm not a monster. Besides, it might do you some good." He leaned forward, his hands on either side of my chair, and his beautiful and terrible eyes met my own, the only part of me left. "I'll let you keep those eyes. I want you to remember my face, and this workshop, and what you signed away of yourself. I want you to remember the life you had before, the beauty, and what you could have kept if you hadn't been so foolish. And especially," he leaned back and swivelled the mirror around to face me, walking to stand by the half-complete mannequin, "I want you to remember this."

My brain was calling out to me to stay seated, but the gleam of the mirror was too strong, and I looked into the face of my lifetime foe. The shriek that tore from my body was enough to make even the Collector jump in his skin. My face, my once perfect face, had been ravaged and destroyed, and yet I could still see a shadow of the face I had once desired in it. Yet that was the worst part; the lips were comically bloated and red, the teeth underneath a bloody snarl as they protruded from my mouth. My tongue was heavy and fat and sat like a leech amongst the running blood, the forked end of it flopping out of my mouth uncontrollably.

My skin was not just smoothened, but taut, pulled against all of my features like an overstretched balloon just waiting to pop. The skin itself was shiny and featureless, devoid of humanity. The cheeks were puffed and intruded into my eyes, and the skin, where not stained by a thick, clotted brown blood, had the look as if it had been coated in a peach plastic. I pulled at the face, hoping to remove the too-thin, crumbling nose the way the Collector had pulled it off so easily, but it wouldn't move. None of my face would move, and I realised, like my heart, it had simply ceased to move with the rest of time.

The Collector looked at me not with pity, but disgust. "Careful. If the wind blows, you'll be stuck with that face. Now, come and look at this little beauty."

Dutifully, I shuffled to where he stood, and if my face could have collapsed at the sight, it would have. My old face had been fashioned into a full mask, upturned in a glorious, human smile. I crooned as I reached out to touch the mask, the most beautiful thing I thought I had ever seen.

“Ah, ah, that’s for me to touch, not you. It’s mine now, remember?”

He said, and he picked it up lovingly as it floated, paper thin, in his hands. He walked slowly with it, whispering to it as I stumbled, gasping, after him down the rows of shelves.

“Here will do nicely, I think,” he said, placing the mask gently amongst the other bits of paper. I looked a bit closer, stumbling back and hitting another shelf, a gargled cry emerging as my skin brushed those pieces of paper. But they weren’t papers at all, they were layers of skin, millions of masks of real human faces he had stolen. And somewhere out there, wherever he was about to send me, there would be millions of others like me, No-Faces, whose facades would replicate my own repulsive nature and whose eyes might share an unspeakable and irrevocable regret.

I staggered away, back to the spot where I had walked in this blighted den. The door swung open behind me, the wind tugging and unrelenting in its quest to drag me back to where I had once belonged and was now a nomad.

I clutched onto the door frame, resisting the pull of the real world outside, where sunlight would expose a thousand more horrors the dim room didn’t show. “Why have you done this to me?”

He looked at me, bored. “They always want to blame me. You came here because you didn’t feel comfortable in your face. You wanted to hide, so I gave you a mask. You can’t begrudge me taking the old one. You should have realised if you ask someone to take parts of you, there’ll be very little remaining. There is one thing you have left. What’s your name, sweetheart?”

I would tell it to you, reader, but it’s no longer mine to give.