



MIRRORHEAD

Stories Connected to
Nine Bodies in a Puddle

by Colin Dunbar

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Piano

You are playing the piano.

You remember how to play, don't you? Maybe it's been a while.

Try to trust yourself. Allow your hands to guide you.

Once you start, your fingers seem to have a mind of their own, drawing themselves from key to key, swinging from note to note.

Next to you is a violinist. She's watching you play, and she almost seems impressed.

As your melody reaches a crescendo, the violinist joins in. You harmonize, the empty, dimly lit room filling with vibrant life.

It is calm and peaceful. The melody produces thoughts of flowers on a warm summer day. Thoughts of a picnic atop a grassy hill. Thoughts of rebirth, reincarnation, and the beginning of something new.

You smile to yourself.

As you drift through the melody, you turn and look at the violinist.

She looks relaxed. Her eyes are shut. She is absolutely focused.

Your instruments entangle one another in sound, embracing the beauty of each other's musical contributions.

You can smell the music.

You smell the hand-picked strawberries in the strings of the violin and embrace the aroma of freshly cut grass with each note from the piano.

And in this bursting, bubbling calamity—*you fuck up.*

An incorrect key press, a finger slip, a note low when it was destined to be high.

The violin stops, cut short, as the violinist opens her eyes, snapping out of the trance.

“#!#XQK!#!KQX!#! [XX[XX[XX[XX !!!!F!” the violinist speaks in some words you could never comprehend.

“uuuuuiiii uiiooooo ooooouuu,” you reply.

You both draw silent before you turn your head down, staring away from the violinist and toward your piano’s keys.

With your eyes held shut, you begin to play once again, following the rhythm. Though the notes remain the same, you can tell that the smell of the song is beginning to sour.

The smell of a fruit on the verge of rotting.

The smell of something burning.

But only seconds into the song, the violinist once again stops.

“uuuuuuuuu oooouuo iiiuuu,” you whisper.


The violinist pauses, staring at you. Waiting for you.

You start the song again, feeling your way through each of the keys.

As the violinist stares at you, you begin to grow wary that you might make another mistake. Even if you shut your eyes, you can’t lose the feeling of being watched.

Your fingers are no longer moving on their own. Each note pressed is a conscious decision. A motivated movement.

You mash the wrong key again.



The violinist doesn't speak. They only sigh.

You close the lid to your piano softly.

"QKXQXXQXQQQX!" the violinist says, putting down their instrument.

"uuu," you reply.

You don't want to stay there.

You can't.

So you decide to leave. To head to the lake.

-O-O-O-

I'm not sure if you're visiting for the first time or if you've been here before, but let's go over the rules again together.

Stepping into the lake brings you to a midpoint between worlds—a small chasm with a thin, rubbery floor.

If you journey lower, cutting through the floor, your reflection will take your place and live life for you in the normal world. In turn, you will enter the world of reflections. A bizarre, absurd land built by your own warped perception of reality.

Welcome.



Xochitl Floats

“Wait, wait, wait.” My sister nearly fell over herself laughing. “Jump on the count of three, got it?”

Even though I could feel my water-soaked socks through my rainboots, it was still fun. We counted together.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

And as we jumped into the puddle, I lost feeling of the ground beneath me. I was stuck in the air. I felt my heart stop in my chest as we dropped to the ground.

We were falling through darkness. Something was wrong. This puddle was a hole.

Was it bottomless? Would we be soaring through this darkness for eternity?

No.

We bounced on a rubbery floor that cushioned our fall.

“Xochitl?” I shouted, looking for her.

“I’m here . . .” she whispered.

“What happened?” I tried to speak loudly so Xochitl could follow the sound of my voice.

“I—I don’t know, but we need to stay still. That way, we can make sure someone finds u—” She stopped mid-sentence as she bumped into me.

“You think Mom will come looking for us?” I reached out and held her hand.

“I don’t know,” she quietly stammered. “I hope so. Do you know what this place is?”

“No.” The word echoed through the dark expanse before us.

“No one is going to know you’re gone, darlings,” a voice spoke to us. It sounded like an older woman.

I shouted and turned around.

A small lantern illuminated a pocket of air. Behind us was a woman with tinted green skin. She had bags under her eyes and looked like she hadn’t slept in days.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Who are you?”

“You’re stuck in a hole between realities,” she whispered. “Just like I am.”

“I don’t like this; I want to go home.” Xochitl stared up at her, speaking with a shaky voice.

“Girls, I hate to tell this to you, but the exit has slip, slip, slipped closed above you. The body of water I came from is a one-way gate now.” Her voice was both soft and loud. “It appears I was lulled into the belly of the beast, and you’ve all tripped in behind me.”

I flinched a bit when she called us girls. I’m not sure why, but I didn’t like it.

Xochitl dropped to the rubber floor, still holding onto my hand and pulling me down with her. I watched tears leak from her eyes.

“Don’t cry, love. You can be free once again like a pigeon in a parking lot.” The green lady smiled.

Xochitl and I looked up at her.

“It might be frightening, but I think you can push your spirits and venture through the realm of reflections. You might just *pop* back to the proper side.”

“Why haven’t you gone back home?” I asked.

“I think it’s nicer down here than in the world up there. If you’d like to stick around, I have plenty of tall tales to tell and terrific games to play. It could be splendid.” She laughed.

“I wanna go home.” Xochitl’s grasp on my hand grew tighter. She was talking to me directly and wasn’t looking at the green woman.

“We’ll get back home,” I reassured her before turning back to the green lady. “How do we do that?”

“That pin on your backpack has a pointy edge. Why not pop the floor and see where it takes you?”

“Is that all?” I asked.

“I’m not sure what happens after that.” The green lady tilted her head. “I’m sorry I can’t help out more, but I have no intentions of leaving this abyss.”

“I’ll get us home safe.” I looked over to Xochitl before taking the pin off of her backpack.

She looked back at me and nodded.

With a press of the sharp metal into the ground, we heard a loud *POP!*

-O-O-O-

As we fell further into the abyss, I turned around to look back at where we were falling from. We were beneath a gigantic eyeball, and the floor we had fallen from was its pupil. The eye was dimly lit, with the remainder of the body shrouded in darkness. I could see a bit of a nose and an eyebrow, but that was about all I could make out.

It looked like it could be a massive human. Someone so enormous, they wouldn't even notice us falling beneath their eye. We were just a speck of dust in the air, or maybe a bit of crust on an eyelid falling off after a long nap.

Xochitl didn't turn to face the eye. Instead, I heard her scream as she faced the pitch-black abyss headfirst.

-O-O-O-

We landed on a hill that looked like it had been drawn with a green crayon. There were bumps everywhere in places where the artist failed to colour within the lines.

"I know this place." Xochitl still had tears in her eyes, but a grin was beginning to form on her face.

"Where are we?" I asked, looking up to see a circular sun with a pair of sunglasses and a smiley face drawn on it.

"I drew this place," she giggled. "It's home."

To our right was a brown rectangle with a red triangle on top. A house.

There was a blue square on the rectangle and two little smiling faces popping their heads out. One was a bit smaller with short brown crayon hair—Xochitl. The other was a bit taller and had dark blue crayon hair—me.

“Look! Let’s go inside.” Xochitl smiled.

She walked up to a small rectangle on the big box of the house, a door, then grabbed onto a black dot on the page, probably meant to be a doorknob.

To my surprise, the door opened, and we were able to walk inside.

The world folded around us like paper, rearranging itself with cuts, and flips, and twists, and turns until we could see a drawing that resembled the inside of our house.

Written in pen above us, in cursive, was a simple sentence.

Find your reflection.

Xochitl had already rushed to the two mirrors hanging up in our kitchen, side by side. Our mother loved symmetry, so to balance out the gold-framed mirror on the right side of the kitchen wall, she had to find a matching one to place on the left.

Xochitl’s face popped up in the first mirror. I could see from behind, and it looked exactly like her. It didn’t have any of those scribbly crayon lines. It was an actual reflective surface. Still, its gold frame was a scratchy yellow circle in this world.

Now, running to the other side of the brown-crayon floorboards, hopping over a particularly high crayon streak that missed its mark, she stood in front of the other mirror.

“I think this one is right!” she said.

I looked at the mirror from behind. I didn’t have a reflection—only Xochitl did.

She looked different. She was much smaller in the mirror. The reflection showed Xochitl even younger than she was now and looked like it could have

been her from a year or two ago. The reflection also looked a bit off—a smaller, softer, and rounder face and maybe slightly larger eyes.

“Wait,” I said. “I think—”

But before I could finish my sentence, Xochitl had already begun to pull the second mirror off the wall.

“Correct!” A voice shouted from above us.

The crayon below us smudged. The floor became damp, dripping the colour downward. Almost the entirety of the house appeared to be melting.

Drops of water hit the paper we existed on, ripping, tearing, and slowly leaving everything to fade away in a blurry, colourful mess.

-O-O-O-

I found myself in the waiting room of a doctor’s office. I jolted up in my chair, shouting, “Xochitl!”

I didn’t hear a reply from her. Instead, someone at the receptionist’s desk hushed me. I couldn’t see their face from around the corner, but I heard the “shhh.”

There were other people in the chairs around me, all waiting silently, staring at their phones.

In the center of the room, standing before everyone, was an extravagantly tall Xochitl. It wore her clothes, but it wasn’t her. Its back stretched tall enough that it had to hunch to avoid hitting its head on the ceiling.

The giant Xochitl's eyes followed me—and they looked just like her eyes. Still, she had no mouth or nose.

Where is she? My heart started racing more than it had at any point before today. It was one thing to be brought into this strange world, but it was much more frightening to think of her being lost on her own.

The giant Xochitl stared at me.

I expected it to do something, but it just stood still, keeping its eyes on me.

I didn't have the courage to get up. Nobody even seemed to notice her in the center of the room, but I felt like I'd be shamed if I did so much as move an inch.

I looked across the room, holding my leg with my hand to keep it from bouncing with anxiety.

A person that looked like a doctor entered and called out my name, urging me to follow behind her.

I stood up, and the giant Xochitl's gaze followed me. It continued to look at me as I walked past it and into the hallway the doctor was leading me down. There were hundreds of doors side by side stretching across the hall.

We walked for a moment until the giant Xochitl was out of view.

"Here we are." The doctor stopped before I could react, and I bumped into her back.

"Sorry, I—" I began but was immediately interrupted.

"Step inside. I'll be with you shortly." The doctor started quickly walking down the hallway.

I looked at the door. It had a piece of Scotch tape with my name written in marker stuck to the top. Underneath my name was another piece of tape with another sentence written on it.

Find your reflection.

I turned the door handle then walked into the examination room.

Needles, drills, saws, and posters of grotesquely detailed images of the human body filled the room. In the center was a giant chair fitted with an arm that held at least a dozen mirrors on its edge.

The chair faced away from the door.

I didn't like the feeling of not facing the door. I was scared something would come in when I wasn't watching—something like that tall Xochitl creature.

I tried to push the chair to turn it, but it was too heavy. I would have to face my fears by facing away from them. To find the real Xochitl. I hoped she was, at the very least, in some place nicer than this.

I closed the door just to be safe.

The backrest was much too big for me to sit in. The entire chair looked like it was designed around someone four times my size. Like it was specifically built for that giant in the waiting room. When I lifted the arm to try to look at the mirrors, they were all slightly too high up. I could only see my forehead.

I scooped up the seat, straightened my back, and stretched to get as high up as I could.

In the reflections, I saw at least thirty different images of myself.

One looked just like my mother when she was my age. Another looked like a kaleidoscope and refracted my face into a million fragments. One amplified and

enlarged every insecurity I'd had in my life, while another made me look exactly the way I always wished I had.

In one reflection, I could see myself in a dark room. My bedroom back home. I had the lights off, but I could still make out the image from the sun pouring past the cracks in my curtains. I was crying.

I remembered that reflection. It was a while ago, a day I could barely find the energy to get out of bed. My parents thought I had gotten up to walk to school with Xochitl, but I hadn't. I was still sitting there, unable to find the will to even stand. I thought about how upset everyone was last time. I thought about how even if I could get up, I wouldn't want to because I'd have to see everyone like that again. So, I stayed there and didn't say anything to anyone. Some fluke of luck meant I got marked down on attendance, and no one even noticed I was gone. Nobody except Xochitl.

As my eyes shot from reflection to reflection, they started to change. They were flickering between images whenever they entered my peripheral vision. I looked to the left side of the set of mirrors. I saw a three-legged goat tied to a post in a barn with two older farmers surrounding it. I saw a man without a mouth nailed to a cross. I saw Xochitl with a wooden stake in her hand, crying, as a child version of myself stood before her.

I couldn't look anymore.

I pressed my thumb up to one of the surprisingly thin mirrors, with my hand positioned on the other side, and cracked it. It cut my finger slightly, but I ignored the pain.

I'd find my reflection, but I'd do it by process of elimination.

When Xochitl was searching for her reflection, she got it correct. For some reason, the image of herself that matched up perfectly wasn't her reflection, but rather the younger, slightly different image was.

I looked at the mirrors I had left and started shattering the ones that seemed least likely.

I broke the man on the cross. I broke the three-legged goat. I couldn't bring myself to break the one with Xochitl holding a wooden stake up to me.

I looked to the other side of the mirrors and found a new image—one of myself behind Xochitl. *My* reflection had a wooden stake this time. I chose to shatter that image.

I saw the mirror that made me look like I had always wished I had. Something was different, though. I had some stubble on my chin and upper lip. My eyebrows were coarser. My hair was shorter. My mother would never approve of it, but I did look happier.

In another mirror, I saw my parents watching the news. They had their backs turned to me. I was sitting, facing the mirror with a colouring book.

I was much younger at the time. I still didn't feel very good about myself.

I watched as my mother came up to me, looked at what I was colouring, and took it away from me, snatching it quickly. I didn't know what I had done wrong. I didn't know what the problem with the book was. She just took it and sat back down to keep watching the news.

I broke that mirror. It was something that really happened, but it wasn't a reflection of me. I hoped.

There was a knock on the door that echoed through the examination room.

I needed to pick a mirror quickly.

For some reason, it had stuck in the back of my head the entire time.

I looked back and forth at the mirrors until the image finally showed back up. It was Xochitl standing before me with the wooden stake.

“Correct!” the voice said once again.

I heard the door creak open as the lights went out.

-O-O-O-

I found myself in my parent’s room this time. There was only one mirror, and it stood on top of my mom’s dresser, directly across from the bed.

“Find Mother’s reflection,” the voice called out from above.

I was never allowed in my mom’s room. Being here, it felt like she could open the door and scream at me any moment. At least then, I’d be out of here.

I stepped toward the mirror.

In the reflection was a beautiful painting of Mary from the Bible.

The gorgeous portrait was complemented by a vintage brown wooden frame that matched the painting aesthetically.

I could hear birds chirping through the mirror. Flowers surrounded the painting. Roses rested in pots across the bed, and daisies were placed upon the frame.

I could still see the portrait’s precise smudging and brushstrokes. Was this my mom’s reflection? It was astonishing. Perhaps she had painted it at some point.

It smelled like church here, like the perfumes of the people that sat in pews next to us. I could almost hear the sound of everyone standing up at once on the priest’s cue.

That's when I noticed black paint dripping from the top of the frame on the other side of the mirror.

I wanted to stop it, but I couldn't just reach through the mirror into the other side.

The black paint gradually dripped, sliding its ink and obscuring the beauty that was there once before.

It was slowly spreading, and without any action, it would soon cover the entire canvas.

I tried to shake the mirror, but it was massive and too heavy. It stretched half the length of the room.

When I pushed the mirror slightly, it moved the ink to the left.

I tried to do the only thing I could think of and tipped the mirror over, knocking it off the dresser and onto the floor. I didn't want the painting to be ruined.

I heard the sound of the glass shatter, and just barely underneath the loud crash, I could make out the sound, "Incorrect."

"█████!" I heard Xochitl shout out my name. A chill ran through my body every time I heard my name. It just didn't feel right. It didn't feel like the name belonged to me.

Xochitl had gotten into the habit of no longer saying my name. My mother couldn't tell, but Xochitl noticed that I didn't like hearing it.

I don't think this voice was Xochitl. She wouldn't say my name.

"█████? What did you do? Why are you in my room?!" I heard my mother scream.

I could hear them both coming toward me, getting up to step up the stairs.

In the seconds I had left, I looked at a shard of glass.

I could see my mother and my grandmother.

My grandmother was handing her a wooden stake.

The same wooden stake I saw Xochitl holding in the earlier reflection.

The lights went black again.

-O-O-O-

“Oh, you got it wrong, too,” Xochitl said, staring up at me.

It really was her. We were on the sidewalk we got lost on, but all of the houses were fuzzy. I couldn’t quite remember what they were supposed to look like, but wherever we were had turned them blurry. We were still inside the world of reflections.

“I don’t really understand what happened,” Xochitl said.

“I don’t either. I think we’re a bit lost, and I don’t know where to go from here.”

“I saw one of the mirrors,” Xochitl told me. “You had that wooden stake. Like the kind they use for vampires. And you looked like you were going to kill me.”

“I would never. You can trust me.” I squatted down to look her in the eye.

“I know. I broke that mirror and chose a different one.”

“Can I ask, have you seen that thing before? The wooden stake?”

“Mom gave it to me . . . but I’m scared of it.”

“Why are you scared of it?” I asked.

“I don’t understand it,” she told me. “And I’m scared that when I do understand it, it’ll be even scarier.”

“When we get home, we can get rid of it.” I smiled to reassure her.

“It won’t be that easy, will it?”

“No. It won’t be.”

The street was silent. No cars passed. No birds sang. No crickets chirped.

“Can I tell you something that you can’t tell Mom?” I said as she reached out to hold my hand. “I’m not ready to tell her yet.”

“What’s that? I won’t,” she replied.

“I’m trans. I’m a boy, and I think I’m going to change my name soon too.”

“That’s cool!” She smiled, but I could tell there was something on her mind. Her eyes weren’t as happy as her smile.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing—it’s just—is anything going to change?”

“What do you mean? I’m going to change my name, and people will refer to me as he or him, and I might look a little different.”

“That’s okay, but you won’t stop hanging out with me, right?”

“Of course not.”

“I’ve always wanted a big brother.” She giggled.

“You’ve always had one.” I smiled.

Mirrorhead

A small part of me always wanted to return to the world of reflections. Ever since Xochitl and I left the lake twenty-one years ago, I've felt like my life has been missing something. The blandness of my work and the feelings of fear of paying my bills on time blended into a messy punch of emotions that I couldn't deal with.

"Hello! My name is Olive, and I'm reaching out on behalf of Fonoco Novelty Gifts. If we've reached you at a good time, we'd love to discuss our product lineup for the winter season," I said into my phone with a false air of positivity.

I was normally terrified of speaking to people. I was hyper-aware of everything that could potentially go wrong, but while following the script, I felt much more confident. After so many calls, I had memorized everything I was supposed to say and would normally be painting or drawing while speaking to people.

While the person on the other end of the phone responded, I was scribbling on a piece of scrap paper. I wasn't making art this time—I was solving a math problem for one of the first times since high school.

Nine years. Forty hours a week. Twelve calls an hour.

"I understand that you may be busy," I continued. "Trust me, we really value your time. That's why we've expertly crafted and designed the following items to make your life easier. Our Fonoco cigarette dispenser is the perfect holiday gift. You only need to unbox a pack of cigarettes and load them into the dispenser. Then, with the tap of a button—"

I was met with dial tone.

"Hello? Are you still with me?"

I shut my phone off, knowing I was slightly ahead of my daily quota and that I could afford a short break.

I added everything up on the paper—with the rare time taken off for vacation, and a couple of sick days, I was close to 200,000 calls. Even with that, I knew I would never get a promotion. I would never be able to afford to own a home.

I was working remotely out of a rental place (basically a shed with a shower) out in the middle of nowhere. I was at least a thirty-minute drive away from the nearest grocery store.

Before I had a chance to step away from my desk, a voice began to scream my name.

A loud, beckoning scream shouting “Olive!” out into the air. It wasn’t a voice that I recognized.

Of course, my first reaction was to hide. I double-checked that the door was locked and crammed myself under my desk.

A few minutes passed, but as the screams continued to repeat my name every few seconds, I began to fear they were calling for help rather than threatening me.

I crept outside, following the voice’s repeated shouts through the densely packed trees, until I came across a small pond. The source of the sound.

When I peered inside, I noticed my reflection was missing. *Odd . . .* I thought to myself. *Could this be . . .*

I placed my hand into the water.

The voice screaming my name stopped, and for a second, there was silence. My hand was still half-submerged in the water as I felt a sudden rush of fear. A quick recognition of a metal smell in the air and a twist in my stomach.

This had to be it. The world of reflections was calling out to me. I had to go back. It must have something to show me. Something that could change my life—improve it.

Last time, the lake was the catalyst in helping me understand my gender identity. It was scary, but it taught me a lot and helped me come to recognize a part of myself that had always felt neglected.

I jumped into the water, hopping like I did into the puddle with Xochitl.

Rapidly, I descended, flying downward through a chasm, barrelling toward some small speck of light in the distance.

I spun as I fell, the wind blowing my shirt up into my face, my screams muffled by the cotton-polyester mixed fabric.

After only a few seconds of fearing for my life, my fall slowed before I gently landed on soft sand. I yanked my shirt down from over my eyes to see a long, expansive beach. In one direction, sand stretched as far as I could look. In the other direction was water.

It felt nostalgic but also incredibly empty. I could smell the familiar scent of salty seawater, but I couldn't see anyone else. I could hear the waves, but I expected to hear the sounds of other people as well.

I was finally back.

“If you just got me some sticks, I could start a fire, c'mon, get me some sticks, I could just . . . start a fire . . .” a voice murmured nearby.

Looking down, I realized there was a person buried in the sand. Only their head and their left hand were poking out. They were speaking to a small crab that quickly scuttled away upon me noticing.

“Are you stuck down there?” I asked, accidentally slipping into my customer service voice before hesitating and correcting myself. “Do you need help?”

“I’m fine. I don’t need help. Though, I’d like some sticks, so I can start a fire. It gets really cold out here.”

“I could just help dig you out,” I suggested, puzzled.

“It’s okay. If you can believe it, I think I’m lucky to be here. It’s a better place than most end up in.”

I didn’t know what to say next. I was frozen, without any idea of how to proceed.

“Most people look for something better,” he continued anyways, “but not me. I’m happy here. I just need sticks. I want to start a fire.”

“Where do most people go?” I finally asked.

“There’s a train. Comes by every once in a while. It heads toward the center of all meaning. Toward the Mirrorhead. It’ll answer any question. But you only get to ask one.”

“What do you mean? What’s Mirrorhead?” I asked.

“I just need sticks. I want to start a fire,” he repeated, sighing.

“What you were just talking about—Mirrorhead. The center of meaning?” I said again.

“I just need sticks. I want to start a fire,” he repeated, sighing.

“Uh . . .” I paused, unsure of the reason behind his sudden repetition.

“Where can I find sticks for you?” I finally asked.

“I just need sticks. I want to start a fire,” he repeated, sighing.

I felt my stomach twist again. It felt like I was doing something wrong, embarrassing myself by speaking to this person buried in the sand.

“I . . . I need to go,” I told him.

-O-O-O-

I started to wander, walking away from the ocean through the endless stretches of sand. The last time I was in the world of reflections, everything was smaller, more claustrophobic. The world was a lot more open now, but it was also much emptier.

“Olive!” The ground shook as I heard the voice that lured me here shout out again from someplace far in the distance.

My legs trembled and sand danced around my shoes.

Maybe if I could find some tracks and follow them, I'd be going . . . somewhere, I thought to myself. There had to be something I was meant to find—some symbolic revelation or even, as much as I hated the idea of it, another person to talk to.

I couldn't help thinking of Xochitl as I walked. I hadn't seen her in an incredibly long time. If I knew where she was now, I probably would have asked her to come with me.

A few years after Xochitl and I first escaped the lake, I decided to come out to my parents as trans. I was scared things wouldn't go well. I knew things wouldn't go well, but I held onto the little bit of hope I had.

I don't like to think back on what happened, but my strongest memory was about Xochitl. I remember how she begged to come with me when I was kicked out of the house.

I had to move to another city. I was homeless for a bit, but a friend I met online let me sleep on their couch until I found a job and a cheap enough place to live.

As much as I missed Xochitl, and even, in a weird and uncomfortable way, missed my parents, I couldn't bring myself to go back. Even after so much time had passed.

I stopped walking for a moment and stood still. My legs were getting sore.

DA-DUNK DA-DUNK DA-DUNK DA-DUNK TCHsssshhhhhh

I heard the sounds of clattering metal accompanied by the wind whistling and a loud bell chiming.

Heading directly toward me—about to hit me—was a giant metallic train.

I managed to jump out of the way at the absolute last second, tripping over myself and landing face-first in the sand.

There were no tracks on the ground. In fact, as the train moved, I realized it was actually gliding on the surface of the sand, moving freely. The giant train's bells continued to clang loudly as it slowly came to a stop.

"All aboard!" a voice called out over the train's speakers. It was difficult to hear. "This is a one-way only trip to the center of all meaning, Mirrorhead."

A door slid open in front of me, leading to a small seating area. From the looks of it, no one else was on board. I looked around at the empty, cushioned seats as the door slid shut and the train suddenly rushed into motion.

I was thrown backward but managed to regain my balance. There were no windows on the train, just a long hallway with an endless stretch of empty seating areas.

Finally, I noticed the writing on the wall.

“Find your reflection.”

This again.

It only took a few seconds to realize I could see my reflection in the shiny, clean tables.

My reflection—the image I saw on the table—was of that person buried in the sand.

“Okay, I get it.” I paused, looking up and down the train. “The head above the sand is a metaphor for me . . . or whatever. What am I supposed to do about that? What does that mean?”

There was no response.

“Is it because I’m stuck in place at work? Because I could’ve figured that much out myself. I’m trapped in place, I think I’m lucky because I’m in a better place than many others are, and now I’m unwilling to change. Is that it?”

Again, the only thing I could hear in the train was the clattering of the tracks.

“I came here for some revelation about myself. I know my job sucks,” I called out, knowing I wasn’t speaking to anyone but hoping for a reply anyways.

“It’s impossible to find a better job—I’ve been trying. I’ve gone to interviews and applied to more places than I can count.”

Nothing changed or shifted because of my words, but I continued to speak aloud.

“Is this about Xochitl? About me not looking for her? Because I want to see her—but I can’t go back home. I won’t.”

I paused, staring at the image on the table. I thought about the man in the sand. How he kept asking for sticks to make a fire.

“This isn’t my reflection.” I declared. “I refuse it.”

Nothing happened. It seemed like another way the world in the lake was different than last time. I expected to be torn away, thrown into some separate reality with a different appearance.

I was still on the train. Still searching for my reflection.

I started walking forward, intently analyzing each table, looking for a reflection other than that head in the sand. Every single table reflected the face of the man in the sand. Slowly, I started to speed up, my pace transforming into a jog and then a sprint as I realized each train cart and table was exactly the same.

There had to be something different somewhere—this couldn’t be my only option.

A series of whispers came from outside of the train cart. There were people outside, speaking to one another.

I had to find my reflection quickly, before the doors opened, before whatever was outside entered. I had to be near a train stop or something. Probably full of creatures that looked like the tall Xochitl that had haunted my nightmares since first seeing them.

I needed to find my reflection, and the only place I could think to look would be outside of the train. I couldn't go left or right, as the chattering grew into the sounds of a large crowd. The only thing I could think of doing was getting onto the roof.

It seemed strange. The voices and the collection of chatter continued to grow louder, becoming indiscernible from one another, but the train was still moving at full speed.

I had noticed while running that every few carts had a small hatch that could be twisted open on the ceiling. I pulled one open myself, stood on a table, then struggled to pull myself up onto the top of the train outside.

The wind was intense on my face, and the light was blinding, but I slowly attempted to gain footing as the train rushed forward.

"Sticks." I managed to make out a sound from one of the voices in the crowd.

I turned down, looking at the sand beneath the tracks.

Hundreds—maybe even thousands—of heads poked out of the sand, their hands sticking out next to them.

"Sticks for a fire," a voice from the crowd said.

There were children and adults—men and women—all covered up to their necks in sand.

"C'mon, get me some sticks," hundreds of voices said at different intonations to one another. All asking each other for something that none of them had.

I then noticed that the heads on the ground seemed to grow denser the closer they were to whatever the train was headed to. They were packed tightly,

with barely enough space to breathe, their voices repeating the same words into ears only inches from their faces.

Directly ahead was a giant dome, its walls made up of mirrors. That had to be where my reflection was. It was the only thing that would have made sense because, as far as I was aware, there were no other reflective surfaces on the train.

The people's words in the sand melted together, becoming an inaudible mixture of unpleasant sounds. They were painfully loud, but one voice managed to speak over them all.

"Olive!" The voice called out my name again.

It sounded like it was coming from the mirror dome in the distance. With the train's speed, it wouldn't be much longer until I arrived.

I struggled to maintain my balance on top of the train, so I crawled back down and found a seat to wait at. I was most likely safe for the time being.

-O-O-O-

Even though everything out here was so absurd, it almost felt refreshing—more engaging than the way I had been living up until this point. When the train drew near the mirror dome, I felt a twinge of excitement. I felt the persistent fear that was always present in my life slowly begin to dissipate.

The train came to a sudden stop, almost launching me out of my seat, as the speaker called out another announcement.

"Now stopping at Mirrorhead Central Station."

I walked off the train, trying to avoid stepping on any of the heads poking out of the ground. I jumped into a sprint, running toward the giant mirror dome before one of the hands in the sand reached out and grabbed me by the ankle.

“Where are you going?” The head of the hand holding me in place looked up at me.

“Sorry, what?” I paused before turning back down and explaining, “I’m going to the—mirror dome thing. I need to find my reflection.”

“You can only go there once, you know. Do you really want to waste it? Wouldn’t you enjoy yourself more if you just . . . stayed in place?” Their grip tightened.

“I . . . I’m going,” I tried to pull myself away, but they continued to hold me.

“You get one question. Mirrorhead will only answer one question. You look ready to waste it,” they said.

“Let go of me.” I asserted.

“The center of all meaning. You could know the answer to any question you can conjure. Don’t *fucking* waste it.”

I finally pulled my leg from their grip as they turned their head and stared blankly in the opposite direction of the mirror dome.

I held my glance on them and watched them return to the same repetitive speech of every other head.

“I just need sticks. I want to start a fire,” they said.

My ankle felt sore from how tightly it was being held, but I took my chance to run anyways, rushing toward the mirror dome.

The heads in the sand were near impossible to step over as I drew closer. I had to apologize to each person as I attempted and repeatedly failed not to step on fingers and hands.

Finally, near the entrance to the mirror dome, the heads stopped. There was a small perimeter that remained entirely empty.

The voices continued to overlap one another, monotone, angered, begging, and even laughing while asking for sticks to start a fire.

Even the door to enter the dome was made of mirrored glass. My reflection in the door looked like myself, surprisingly enough. I knew it couldn't be that simple.

I opened the door, facing a giant creature—a massive human body with a mirror for a head.

“Olive!” it shouted. The sound of the voice burst out of Mirrorhead as if it were a speaker.

Mirrorhead had been calling out to me this entire time. Why? What did it want from me?

I took a step in its direction.

It knelt down, lowering its mirror face toward me.

I looked into my reflection's eyes.

[Illustration of Mirrorhead with reflective paper]

“Olive?” Another voice asked, much more quietly, from behind Mirrorhead.

Xochitl. Even after years apart, I recognized her immediately.

Without a word, I ran up to hug her, embracing her in my arms. She hugged me back, and I could hear her sniffing over my shoulder.

“Are you real?” I paused to ask, staring at her. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m real,” she said with choked speech. “I came back to the lake because I missed it here, and, well . . .”

She paused as I turned and looked at our reflection in the face of Mirrorhead. She was an adult now. I had missed so much of her past—she wore glasses now, and she was so much taller. We should have grown up together. If everything were right, this wouldn’t have been so much of a shock.

“I came back too . . .” I explained. “I kept hearing my name being called out . . . and I think I missed being in the lake too.”

“You heard your name?” Xochitl withdrew from our hug, holding her hands on my shoulders.

“Yeah . . .” I looked at her. “I think it was this Mirrorhead creature thing. It kept calling out my name.”

Xochitl looked down at her feet. “When I came down here, I heard about Mirrorhead. A creature that would answer any one question. And . . . I guess . . . I asked what your name was. You never told me what new name you decided on before you . . . had to leave.”

I felt tears form in my eyes.

“Olive,” I whispered. “My new name is Olive.”

Xochitl smiled with the corner of her mouth, her hands finally drawing back from my shoulders and down to her side.

“I know,” she said. “Mirrorhead told me. And it’s been yelling your name ever since. Answering my question over and over again. I wasn’t sure why it kept shouting your name—and I didn’t think it would actually happen—but I’m so glad you came.”

Silence lingered in the air for a few seconds. It was difficult to think of what to say with so much time apart. Even though I had been so close to Xochitl in the past, I hadn’t seen her in so long that I didn’t know how to . . . talk.

“Did you have a question you wanted to ask Mirrorhead?” Xochitl asked.

I hated it, but I think she was able to pick up on my discomfort.

“I can give you some privacy if you need,” Xochitl continued.

“No!” I accidentally shouted as an immediate response. “I mean—please. Stay. I don’t want to get separated again.”

“Don’t worry.” Xochitl looked at me with a full smile on her face. “No matter what, I won’t let that happen.”

Mirrorhead suddenly jolted toward me, pressing the mirror within a few inches of my eyes.

“I . . . Uh . . . Okay! I think I . . .” So much was going on at once, with Xochitl and the pressure of thinking of a question worth asking.

I thought back to trying to find my reflection earlier. Finding my reflection would help me in some way. It would help me overcome my fear of conversation and bring Xochitl and me home.

“We can wait if you need more time,” Xochitl said.

“It’s okay.” I stopped her. “I think I know what I’m going to ask.”

Mirrorhead pressed even closer to me, the glass of the mirror feeling ice cold against my skin.

“I . . . Where can I find sticks?” I asked. “I need to start a fire.”

“Are you sure you—” Xochitl began before Mirrorhead cut her off.

There was a loud blaring sound as the mirror shot to face upward, reflecting an image onto the ceiling and onto the walls of the mirror dome around us.

Every reflection showed Mirrorhead’s chest.

It looked normal at first, but upon closer inspection, I recognized something stuck inside of him.

Poking out, just barely, was a long wooden stake.

I removed it as Xochitl turned away. She couldn’t bring herself to watch.

I took the stake, held it above my knee, and cracked it in half.

Two sticks.

Mirrorhead took a step back, sitting, looking calmer and moving more gently than before.

Xochitl hesitantly followed me as I walked outside of the mirror-dome.

The heads on the ground saw me, holding two halves of the stake, and went silent.

I gently placed the two pieces of wood in the hands of the buried person closest to me.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Tchshh.

The sparks grew into flames in a matter of seconds as the fire spread from person to person, entirely engulfing the densely packed field of heads.

The smell of smoke quickly twisted its way into something much better. Freshly cut grass. The smell of sweet, handpicked strawberries.

I watched as smoke clouds blossomed from the flames. On the clouds were the silhouettes of thousands of people standing up—dancing.

First, there was laughter, then singing, and before long, the tune of instruments echoed from the fire. Guitars and drums and harps and tambourines and violins and pianos.

“Correct!” I heard a voice call out from some indistinct place above us.

I looked over to Xochitl again.

I struggled to find the words to thank her for waiting for me, to thank her for wanting to know my name, but she seemed fine with my silence. We were both content listening to the joyous sounds of the people in the flames.



Violin

You are playing the violin.

“QkxqXxqxQxxK,” you whisper to yourself.

The pianist left quite a while ago.

You were too harsh to them, weren’t you?

Your hands hurt. You’ve been practicing for such a long time.

Put down the violin.

Go find them.