

Mirrors

by Tiffany Wang

I.

I am the perfect reflection of my sister – and I suppose that’s the entire point.

Lightly, with softness she was always too impatient to master, I count my breaths, pacing them steadily to remind myself to stay grounded. I think of her smile, too bright to contain, and how it bleeds into mine, marring into a laugh.

For a second, it’s like she’s there with me. “Shut up, Kayla,” she says breathlessly (of course; Azalea was always breathless, whether it be from anger or excitement). She pushes me playfully, but before I can react, she fades back against the air, and I’m left with nothing more than a memory of what could’ve-been.

II.

When Azalea was born, she was my parents’ fourth child. The first two had died young. The third had caught a cancerous disease and wasted away in their arms. By the time she came around, they were desperate for Azalea’s survival, borne down with the intense pain from burying their children.

So, in a time where copying – cloning – was barely becoming legal, they scraped Azalea’s cells into a dish, and paid for a second, identical face to match hers.

The technology was fast and efficient. It didn’t take long before I was born (could I be born, though?) within the span of a year. Azalea and I looked so similar, though, that I always

pretended we were twins, spun together, lived together, and, thousands of years later when our fairy wings had disappeared and we turned back into humans, would die together.

Silly me.

III.

There's a quiet knock, shattering the incessant honking of cars. My father walks in, his shirt pressed and immaculate. "Kayla," he says, and if my mother is hysterical with her grief, her sobs heard through the wall, he is as composed as I've ever seen him. "Darling, are you alright?"

I open my mouth to reply, but I find I have no words. Finally, I stop thinking and let my mind float. "Fine," I say, lying through my teeth.

I can tell he doesn't believe me, though he lets it go. He straightens his tie uncomfortably.

"Honey," he says unfalteringly, "would you mind giving a speech?"

I don't think I've heard him correctly at first. "Sorry?" I say.

He sighs. "Kayla," he says, and I hear the politician click into place, replacing what little is left of my father with the face that millions voted into office. "Your mother and I need you to be there tonight. When it comes to her part, give it for her instead."

The thought tears my chest apart.

IV.

It's not like my being a clone (*God*, I hate that word) was a secret. My parents made it very clear from the beginning – not only to me, but to the public as well – what I was. In the end, Senator Edward Thomas was nothing if not politically transparent.

Azalea and I gave our first set of speeches when we were twelve. In front of a panel of eight of the richest people in the world, we managed to convince them to keep funding on the Gemini Project – that is, the program that had made me *possible*.

Later, Azalea refused to look at me in our room. When she finally did, I saw her features harden. “It’s not you, Kay,” she said quietly. She looked like a porcelain doll, still in that stupid red dress that contrasted with my blue one. “I just – I don’t know.”

It only took five words to break my heart. “Aza?” I said softly. I couldn’t finish after that. My sister had always made it very clear that she opposed the radical technological advances in our society. She scorned at the genetic manipulation and detested autobots – but maybe I thought this was different.

I was her sister.

V.

I search for her notes.

The Great Senator Edward Thomas has spoken, and it’s left to us to do what we can.

Azalea used to say that, her voice pitched low to mock our father, one hand on her hips, jumping around wildly on her bed. Her side of the room is a torrential mess, strewn with papers and half-filled journals. I leaf through several books, trying to find the remnants of her speech. There’s no way she didn’t start one – for all her messy tendencies, Azalea was meticulously detailed with her records.

I find it half-buried under a textbook of theology and a pamphlet for another rally. Her spiraling handwriting covers the page, looping gracefully, inking her thoughts into beautiful, terrible words.

VI.

She began sneaking out when we were thirteen, dressed in shadowy clothing, brochures for underground protests and rallies stuffed in her pockets. “You can come too, you know,” she said once, as I helped her disable the security system.

I saw her (her honeyed hair tied back, lips parted, the words TRY OR DIE stitched onto the scarf around her forehead) and I watched as she stepped backwards into a world that I didn’t – couldn’t – belong in. “No thanks,” I said, and, with one nod, she walked into the night and melded into the darkened silence.

VII.

I am caught against the shallow light of the window, a fly pinned under the unrelenting glass.

I remind myself that I have to breathe.

VIII.

We were fifteen when she decided she wanted to see what color her heart was.

I found her in the living room, a razor in her palms, as she tore through her flesh to try to pull it out. I screamed, paralyzed, and I remember her sharp gaze up to me, the grin that spread over her lips that made me fear her in a hollow, horrible way. “What’s the matter, Kayla?” she slurred, and I swore I could smell the alcohol from her breath, even from my distance. “They’ll finally be able to tell us apart!”

Then she laughed – and, dear God, that laughter was unlike anything I’d heard before. It bordered on someone who’d been driven mad, someone who’d had life dangle everything at them, only to snatch it back.

The surgeons brought her back. There was talk afterwards of how lucky she’d been, how the cuts hadn’t been that deep. When she woke up, she promised she didn’t recall a thing (“I drank too much, Dad, that’s all”), but I would glimpse her staring at the empty walls, and the expression she wore was one of complete, devastated sadness.

IX.

“Are you ready, Miss?”

The chauffeur is at the door, his cap tipped low over his head. I smooth out my dress and nod, moving forward, smiling prettily, letting the world know that I’m here, in control and ready for everything.

Inside, I shrink back.

I’ve never given one of these without Azalea by my side.

X.

She was crying, tears streaming down her face, dripping down onto her shirt. When I came in though, even with her back to me, she answered immediately. “Go away, Kayla.”

“We have to go,” I said hesitatingly.

“Right,” she said, her laugh warbling into a bark. “ANOTHER GODDAMN SPEECH FOR THE GREAT SENATOR.”

With her biting words, she threw a handful of papers behind her. They fluttered to the ground surprisingly loudly, settling to the ground. “Do you have any idea how hard this is?” she snarled. “ADVOCATING FOR SOMETHING THAT I DON’T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT?”

She was talking about cloning. She was talking about me.

“God, Kayla,” she said, it is sounded like she was collapsing in on herself. “You should know that I love you – but, God, DEAR GOD, I hate this. THIS –” and then she was pulling at her perfectly made hair and skirt and whirled around to look at me, running her sleeve across her makeup, so that the mascara pressed against the black silk, “– all of this. You’re my sister – but this – THIS. This world that we’ve created and made beautiful and then fucked up – *Kayla, this is wrong.*”

You’re wrong.

She might as well have said the words out loud. I looked at her looking at me – the carbon copy that was carved from her DNA but grew up to become the calmer, dimmer version; the living reminder of her genetics being prodded under microscopes by men in white overcoats – and I understood how she felt, the frustration that ate away at her.

After all, it attacked me with renewed ferocity every single day.

XI.

I am dressed in white.

My hand is shaking, my sister’s half-finished notes clutched in my grip. They’re full of meaningless phrases (“*I truly believe,*” “*The cloning project is a success,*” “*With all my heart...*”).

The car is cold, buzzing bitter air at me.

In fifteen minutes I will be standing in front of an audience, just like I've been for the past six years. I will smile and shake hands with the most powerful people in the world. I will stand up front and say that my sister couldn't be here today because of a mild cold. No, nothing fatal, just the flu. Maybe I'll even make a joke, and some people will chuckle politely before I delve into the emotional meat of why the cloning program should continue.

All to sell my name just a little bit more.

XII.

Three days ago, Azalea was in front of the silver mirror in our room. Her shirt was off, exposing the way her body dipped in, rounded out. Her pale skin flushed at the light tread of her touch. She saw me behind her and smiled thinly. "Suppose there was just one difference," she said.

I slipped off my blouse and stood beside her. Everything was the same – it was a striking double identity, a paradox in the natural order of the universe that had made us painfully similar in every aspect, aside from the braided scar over her heart. "There isn't," I replied.

She didn't seem surprised, just burdened with a quiet, definite sadness. "I thought so," she said, and her voice was heavy, weighted with the realization.

XIII.

There are three hundred people waiting here.

What I say next will likely determine if this project will stay or not, at least for the next year. For a second, I shut my eyes, imagining doing this year after year. Until I'm too old to walk? Talk?

When will this end?

At the bottom of the paper, Azalea has written one last word: SOULS????????????????

It's been crossed out and rewritten so many times that I wonder how many hours she spent pondering over it. SOULS.

Hers? Theirs?

Mine?

XIV.

The day my sister hanged herself was a Tuesday. The sky was blue, birds sang, the grass was green. There wasn't any foreshadowing – no grim music to stop me from entering the living room and throwing my bags onto the couch.

No warning before a trickle of blood dripped onto my face.

No sound except for me, as everything fell apart, as the bright splash of anger around Azalea's throat howled in laughter, her glazed eyes glaring down at me with a ferocity that pulled me apart and slammed me into the ground.

XV.

My excuses are blurred, as they bounce around while I push through the amassed crowds, ignoring the whispers: *Is she okay? What's wrong? That's the senator's other daughter, isn't it?*

I run out onto the balcony, overlooking the sea. The lapping ocean beams at me, whispering excitedly, and I'm suddenly reminded of so long ago, when Azalea and I were little kids. She braided my hair and I squealed and she kissed me on the cheek. "Anything for you, Kayla!" she sang, her seven-year-old self so abashedly confident that I would've followed her into hell.

For one second, I think that was before – that it's now dead and gone.

And in the next, I discover that I am just like my sister.