

Sally looks into the mirror and the mirror behind her looks at her too and that reflection stares at her reflection which stares at her reflection which stares at her reflection, staring and staring and staring forever and forever, forever, never to end, and she looks into the mirror and the mirror behind her looks at her too which stares at her reflection which stares at her reflection. Infinite reflections reflected against reflections infinite.

She blinks. Thousands upon thousands blink.

She giggles, chuckles. They all giggle and chuckle. This is the game little Sally plays in her bathroom. Infinite Sallys, every morning, trapped within two parallel mirrors.

As she brushes her teeth, she dances with her shoulders to a rhythm that plays only in her head. The infinite Sallys follow suit, shrugging and bumbling—everyone getting toothpaste over their chubby cheeks while their short blonde hair bobs. Why not dance? The summer is here, and its warmth is all-embracing, and she is surrounded by friends.

She spits and breaks into nonsense rhymes, rhymes without meter or substance, but she does not care for her countless reflections—their joy, their chaos, their toothpaste—bring her a comfort beyond compare, the comfort of thousands like-minded allies, all linked together, all being silly. All having fun. With millions on her side, she is made whole.

Pulling her mouth wide open, she examines the adult teeth that have finally settled into her lower jaw. The tooth fairy gave her \$5 for her last one. Reignited in their jubilant celebration, all the Sallys burst into song.

Sally's voice has occupied the Martin household for the last month. Whenever she catches a sound—a bursting boombox on the street, the smooth grooves of Mom's vinyl—she grabs it, reforms it, then spews it endlessly until every word becomes drilled into every member of the family.

The process has begun to exasperate Sally's father. From the moment he returns to work, he knows he will be bombarded with the same ten-word chorus until he can think of nothing else. It pains him, specifically his right hip, but he says nothing. Her joy is too robust to silence.

Sally's mother has landed upon a different opinion.

As Sally leaves the bathroom, Mom declares from the kitchen, "Sally, come here."

Sally toddles over, stumbling into Mom's shadow. She gazes up: How tall Mom is. Slender. Beautiful in the angularity of her features. Mom is amazing, she thinks.

#

Mom stares down at the girl and a cold unease drips its way down her body. The girl is wearing the same dress as yesterday, she thinks.

Mom has long learned how others look at her—how anyone looks at an attractive woman. Like fine china—full of awe, grace, respect. She enjoys the power, but, unlike the porcelain, she has learned to harden herself to survive a fall. She knows: There is always someone aching and hungry to smash beautiful things, especially a woman.

Poise is her shield and beauty her blade. And they are strong. Sharp. So as Sally continues to bob, Mom is again left with a dominating thought: How her daughter shares nearly no resemblance to her.

Sally inherited too much of her father—his roundness, his undignified personality. They bounce both externally and internally, with fat plopping around and too many chaotic giggles abound. Neither can control themselves. And as the girl has aged, it only has worsened, as she grows into the shape a fire hydrant that spews ever-increasing volumes of liquid auditory foolishness. They share only their hair and eyes.

If this does not cease, she knows Sally will be destroyed.

Sally leans against their mahogany countertop. Her toothy grin rests easy.

“You are going to begin to take vocal coaching,” Mom orders. “Your father doesn’t like hearing it all day, but you have potential. You need to work, though. You will practice twice a week.”

After thinking for a moment, Sally sticks her tongue out. “Okay, Mama.” Then she begins to hop, prancing on her toes like a rabbit.

“Stop jumping.”

Sally stops.

Mom stares down at her. “You’re getting older. Soon you are going to need to start acting your age. Do you understand?”

Sally nods once. “I think I do.”

Mom examines her daughter, masked under her shadow. After studying her up and down, she leans over and lightly embraces her. “I love you.”

Sally hugs her back, squishing her. “I love you more, Mama.”

#

“I told you. It goes ‘ahh-AAhh-AAAhhh’ not ‘agghh-gahgah-blurg-duh-jurg,’ or

whatever that was. Do it again.” Nathan is a wrinkled man with graying eyes held in a constant squint. More than once, he has told Sally that he is tired of living and tired of people, and she should count herself lucky that she is not a person yet but still a girl. He resumed coaching children and their pubescent voices after he and his wife blew the retirement fund that was meant to last for twenty years in two. Now the wife is gone and there is nothing left but work.

Nevertheless, the work remains fruitful. Over the years, he has ensured that his name has flowed like mercury, dripping through the minds of affluent parents who *know* their child is the golden one while he silently contaminates their wallets. And often the child appears made of gold, with their perfected teeth or diamond-encrusted earrings or clothes he himself cannot afford, but it soon becomes clear it is only leafed. Another layer down, below the skin, they are nefarious brats or talentless deviants. Never gold at all, only pyrite and rhinestone. Yet there is something about the foolish little girl before him that he likes. An honest imperfection.

For a few weeks now, he has watched spit drip and fly out of her mouth as she performed the silly exercises he required of her. How her eyes nearly cross when she tries to concentrate on something. He thinks she is funny looking, that she has the dumbfounded face of a confused baby. But she does what he asks of her, and she does it with focus and with determination and with will. There is no fight with her. She has the fight in her. Learning is a game that she yearns to master. That is her quest. And that is why he pities her. He knows a girl like her does not fit into his world of assholes.

Sally vibrates her tongue against her lip. Spit dribbles down her chin. He lightly

touches her shoulder. “Stop for a second, Sally.”

She pauses, staring at him with her blue eyes. So deep and big on her young face, he falls into them. He softens his voice and asks, “Do you really want to be doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Singing, all this work. Is this your decision?”

She looks at him, tapping her chin, curious. “Of course I do! I love to sing. I think it’s fun.” She giggles.

In return, he barks out a laugh that turns into a cough, weighed down by years of cigarettes and various other substances. He swallows it, finding some spit of his own dribbling down his chin. He wipes it away. “Singing is one thing, the work that goes into making it into something is another. Don’t forget that.”

A silence balloons while a light bobs in the hall—Mom’s shadow moving. Nathan coughs again. Then he takes a deep breath and exhales. “All right, back to work. Keep going.”

Mom prepared diligently for Sally's eleventh birthday. The girl deserved an award, she decided, for she had won a leading role in the school musical. The party would have all the niceties required for tweens stuffed in their town house: balloons (purple and pink exclusively), three cakes, soda, sweets, a photographer, a caricature artist, a DJ, and a horde of children. To fulfill the last requirement, she had to mingle with some mothers at the school—often quite demeaningly—but failure was not an option. They would come.

And come they do.

The house chokes after nearly every one of Sally's classmates—fifty-one in total—have stuffed themselves in like roaches chasing after the discarded candy cane one child dumped behind the couch. Under their tiny feet, the timbers appear to be vibrating.

“Sally, this party is amazing!” Michele—the girl with the black hair who sits at the popular table and always wears a blue bracelet around her arm (but always only her left arm)—shouts.

Sally nods. “Thanks!” She waits for Michele to say something more, but the girl only turns to Brittany and laughs and sips from her brown soda. Sally walks away, wandering through her home.

Their green sectional couch, her favorite leather seat, they all look foreign, filled with children she barely recognizes nor has ever spoken to. One boy spills soda onto his faded jeans. Another, a tall one, pretends to be a monkey.

The music hurts her ears. No one is looking at her. No one is talking to her.

Suddenly, despite all the screaming and cake and music and dancing and eyes and shoes and dresses and shaking and smiles and chaos, the house feels empty. Something is

missing, she feels. She is missing. Materialized from a space inside her mind never before explored, an invisible separation between her and the others juts out. The distance between her and the children is stretching. It goes and grows, sending them to perhaps the opposite ends of the earth, for she knows she cannot traverse it, not at that moment. She feels all this instantly but does not understand it. Yet it is there. There is distance.

The room is a void in camouflage.

A strange and unfamiliar coolness runs through her; a sudden gust of cold ripples down the back of her neck though the room is scorching with the mass of young bodies. She breaks out into a run.

Slicing through a circle of four of them—Kate, Ashley, Tiffany, Brad—she sidles into the hallway and nearly trips but catches herself on the wall then dashes forward to her room. But as she opens the door, she feels a tap on her shoulder.

“Isn’t this fun!” Mom’s rare grin reveals all her teeth—perfect, straight, white.

Sally takes a step back. “I guess.”

“Then why are you hiding out here?” Mom gives a mocking frown. “You should be with your friends, Sally. They’re expecting you.”

“I will later. I’m just tired.”

Mom points down the hallway at a girl leaning against a shelf. “Talk to her!”

“I don’t know her.”

“Then meet her!” Mom pushes Sally, sending her stumbling a few steps forward, before Sally catches herself and turns around. “Sally…” Mom makes her mom face. Sally hates when she makes that face.

“I know what will cheer you up.” Mom begins to walk away. “Wait right here.”

Sally waits for a few seconds, then moves toward her bedroom door again, but Mom returns, holding a thin square package, wrapped tightly in red and white ribbons. “Here, you can open my gift early.”

Gently, Sally pulls on the ribbons and allows the top to slide off and topple to the floor.

“Don’t litter.”

There is a plastic black container with a thin and shiny cover, like a slate that will open a portal to a new world. Sally pushes it open and finds a palette of different shades of beige and a tube on the side. Makeup and mascara and foundation and cover up. Sally stares at it, the colors and their complexity. She hesitates, then says, “Thanks Mom, but I’ve never used makeup.”

“It is important to look nice, and with how Nathan tells me your lessons are going, it is going to be extra important for you.”

Sally does not know what she means, so she simply says, “Thanks.”

Mom hesitates before she snaps at her. “You don’t think your friends wear makeup? Look.” She grabs Sally’s shoulder and points at the girl leaning by the shelf. “Look at her face. You see her eyes? You could have eyes like that.”

Sally steps forward to get a better look, expecting to see glitter or gold in the girl’s gaze. But there is only a foreign darkness around her eye. It makes her look old. Black and strange.

“Sally, get in front of the camera.”

The girl is sitting and reading a biology textbook and wearing a red dress. The dress is aggressive. It hugs her changing body, featuring a plunging neckline, cleaving just before her burgeoning breasts. Mom bought it last week. She said it would help her stand out. Highschool approaches; she must be ready.

“Come on Sally!”

“Let me finish this work.”

“It’ll only take a second. Come on, this is important.” Mom has set up a camera—the third most expensive one from the camera store—and a microphone. She tipped the man at the store to set it all up for her. A video application for Tehman’s School for Performing Arts. She thinks it is ridiculous—why should they not want to see her in person—but Tehman is the best. And only the best for her girl.

Mom tugs on Sally’s hand, and she puts the book down. She reluctantly rises, scattering forward like a dog being pushed into a cage. She leans into the camera’s view. She thinks Nathan would have never let her do this—at least not wear that dress—if he was still around.

“Get more centered. And stand up straight! Look at my back. Does it ever slouch? No, never.”

Sally rolls her eyes, then pushes her shoulders back and her chest up. She is tall for her age, that is what they say at school. Deep breaths, that is what Nathan taught her. Deep breaths. She needs them. She closes her eyes. Center yourself, stabilize, and sing. Sing. Sing.

The words stream out like honey pouring—sweet, gentle, smooth. They propel themselves forward as a rock shot out onto a pond, generating perfect sonic waves that float out into the air. They create a dance of their own, flittering strong and sharp while remaining tender and warm. They dive high and they dive low, effortless and free. They run, they stop, they skip, they glide, able to turn on a dime. They love their existence. They embrace themselves without reserve as they know they are grace itself. They range wide: rising with vigor and stamina in each crescendo like a looming tidal wave, falling with precision and elegance in each crash like a swooping falcon. They vibrate with power, make themselves known in a stirring resonance. They exit her lips as newborns, ready to explore and grow and establish themselves fully realized. They are nourishment for the starving. They are water for those lost in the desert. They are roses rising out of ash, hot fire in the face of dark snow, a summer sun rising out of a cool night—able to turn the dark into light. They are profound: Sally’s voice exists in a dimension unique to itself—beyond simply sound—for in every listener, with every syllable, emotion and color and memory and passion and desire is bloomed and intertwined, evoking within consciousness unpredictable patterns of experience that defy simple definition. It is beauty. It is bliss. It is everything. It is Sally.

She finishes and opens her eyes. The room returns to her. The final words settle, fading gently into peaceful nothingness.

Mom has a half smile. “Oh my God, Sally that was great! Really fantastic! Now can we try once more, with you smiling at the beginning?”

The cafeteria buzzes as students plot their summer plans. They speculate: What will high school like? They gossip: Which kids are going to private school, which are going to public school, and which have no future. For some, the idea of getting older, becoming the “young adults” their parents claim they will be, brings visions of a grand future. They can see themselves in complex scenarios—love triangles or orchestrating elaborate pranks—fantasies generated by the television screen. But only one idea holds Sally’s attention. An end.

“I will miss you, Becky. You know that right?” Sally is sitting beside Rebecca, as they have for lunch for the last eight years.

Rebecca hesitates to respond, electing to instead stare at another table of girls chattering. She says, “Don’t worry. We’ll hang out next year no matter where we go to school.”

They sit alone, at the back corner of the cafeteria. Sally likes it—the privacy. But Becca continues to stare elsewhere.

“Do you remember that one time in fifth grade?” Sally asks.

“Which time?”

“That time you spilled yogurt all over your shirt, and Frankie laughed, so I threw my yogurt at him but missed and it landed on Jessica?”

A sly smile emerges across Rebecca’s face. “Of course I remember that. How could anyone forget it?”

They grow silent once more. The ambient noises of the cafeteria’s children clatter and spread over them.

“Listen.” Sally grows quieter.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for being a really good friend.” She hesitates. “I needed it.”

Rebecca glances at her, perplexed. “Of course.” Then she yawns and stretches and stands. “Give me a second, I need to ask Paula a question.”

As Sally watches Rebecca walk away and begin to laugh with a girl they have hardly spoken to for the five years, an uncomfortable ache emerges like a lonely spider is crawling beneath her dress and onto her stomach, searching desperately for its lost web. Rebecca and Paula are going to the same high school, she knows. She just wants to get to know her, she bargains.

Sally leans onto the table and gazes at the floor. Her shadow has grown long under the florescent lights. As the crowd rumbles, it trembles.

Sally lies flat on her back in the living room on their shaggy carpet in front of a muted TV. Its blue hue glimmers over her face, but she does not turn toward its light. Instead she opens her mouth and sings, with her eyes closed. She is Annie, an eleven-year-old little orphan girl swooped up by Daddy Warbucks. She cannot decide what is more ridiculous—the idea she can still play a child or the idea that someone will swoop in and save you.

Her diaphragm contracts, air flows in. Her diaphragm relaxes, air flows out. Her breath, abdominal muscles, back muscles, and intercostal muscles all act in coordination, in an orchestra of their own, to produce smooth sound. She is that little girl, with a voice of diamond.

But an eruption of noise destroys her focus.

She stops, opens her eyes. A few rooms beyond, a door slams, and her father's hoarse shout makes the floor shake.

“Why do you always do this? Why? Why? You can't just have a nice dinner.”

Mom yells back, “Do you know how fucking annoying you sound?”

The two walk through a hall, around a corner, and into the living room. Sally stares at them—her father's red face, the cracks in mother's typical mask. They are breaking, she knows it. Something inside of them is crumbling. She presses a finger against her cheek and finds a tear flowing down.

They both look down upon her. Then Mom spits at his face. “Look! Look what you did.”

Dad rubs his hands back and forth against his thinning hairline. He throws his right

hand high into the air with his palm stretched out, declaring a surrender. He says quietly, “I’m sorry, Sally.” He does not face his wife but begins to move. “I got to go. I need some air.”

Breaking out into tears as well, Mom screams after him, “Of course you do. Go! Go! Get out of here.”

Down the hall, the front door slams shut. The light of the TV dances across the plains of their carpet, but the music is no more. Silence dominates the room.

#

Mother and daughter sit awkwardly on a couch in the lobby of a skyscraper. “He’ll be here soon,” Mom assures her.

They wait for the casting director to meet them. Sally auditioned last week for her first paying job—a commercial featuring a banana, ice cream, and an elephant—and they called back, but gave her only a minor role in the background. Mom insisted that they go there and talk to the staff to find something better for Sally. She begged her to stand down, but Mom did not cease. She declared, with hungry eyes, that this was the opening. And as the argument spiraled, her shrieks grew shakier and her hands more volatile. The chaos only stopped when Sally agreed to come with her.

Mom begged the secretary at the front to leave a message for the director.

“We should leave,” Sally says. They have been waiting for thirty minutes.

“No. He’ll be here soon.”

Another five minutes passes. They say nothing to each other. “Mom, I am leaving.”

Sally rises, but Mom grabs onto her hand. “Look, look!”

Out from the end of the hall, a silver elevator slides open. A suited man exits, smiling, his black hair carefully combed and flared over his head. He comes straight to them.

“Hello, what can I do for you?”

“My daughter was given a role that I do not think is properly suited given her talents, and I would like to know why.”

The man studies Sally, trying to piece together who she is. He laughs, then claps once.

“Yes, the girl with the amazing voice, I remember!”

Sally’s shoulders shrink, her back bends. She falls into her shadow.

“Yes, the girl with the amazing voice. And your commercial features singing, does it not?”

The man scratches his chin. “Yes, well your daughter’s voice is great, and we thought she was—is—adorable.”

“Yes?”

“But we didn’t think she’d be the right fit for one of leads, but we were happy to give her a spot for the chorus.”

Wrinkles materialize as Mom tightens herself. She snaps, “What do you want her to do?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why don’t you want her? Tell me, what is wrong with her?”

Tearing up, Sally begins to walk away toward the entrance. Mom grabs her arm.

“Stop, Sally.”

She shoves her back, sending Mom falling onto the couch. Sally looks down at her

hard, at Mom's disgusted face and bitter eyes.

The man steps back. Mom rises, not breaking her gaze at Sally, and says slowly, "We need to talk outside."

Sally beelines for the door.

Mom whispers to the man, "We'll be right back."

Sally shoves her way open through the building's long glass doors, letting them clatter behind her. The city's soundscape hits like a brick. She waits. The door opens again. Someone stands behind her, but Sally refuses to turn. Along the concrete beside them, two long shadows stand side by side, melding into one as they hold hands in their dark.

"I think you're taller than me now. And more beautiful than ever."

Sally says nothing.

A sigh. "You know that there is no one else who will look after like you I do. There is no one else who will love you like I do. Not your father, not your friends. Nobody. It's just me."

Rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand, Sally bends her head toward the sidewalk. Still, Mom's power cannot be denied. She feels those eyes piercing through the side of her skull, shooting straight to her brain.

"Don't forget that. Never forget that." Mom pauses, waiting for a response. "Do you understand that, Sally?"

Still silence.

"Do you?"

Sally finishes cleaning off her eyes and matches her mom's sigh. "Yes. I do, mother."

“Now let’s hug, say we love each other, and go back into that room to get you a better part.”

It is a Saturday when Mom knows Sally will receive the most important news her young life. Or at least that was how Mom described it last week.

Throughout high school, Sally had chained together some low paying gigs, but now she is up for something big—the role of Fantine in *Les Misérables* for a professional theatre company. They advertised: “Looking for an accessible younger actress with emotional depth and an earth-shattering voice.” That is Sally. That is her daughter. Mom sat by the phone all day, waiting in anticipation, while Sally tried to watch TV but could not focus, not with her stomach turning.

Then at 3:42 PM, the phone rings. Mom snatches it up. Listens. Sally watches her across the room, watches her lips move. They form a smile. Then a grin. Then a wild explosion of jubilation. She puts the phone down. She runs into the living room, screaming. “AHH! AHH!” She envelops her daughter in her long thin arms. “You did it! You did it! You did it!”

She kisses the side of her head then disengages. “I need to tell Lucy. She won’t believe this.” She runs back to the phone.

Sally stares blankly out into their immaculate living room. Something is wrong. Her stomach still hurts. The nervousness is still there. The buzz from the TV is infuriating. She grabs the remote and turns it off. In the screen’s darkness she sees the reflection of her scowl. She wonders why she is not smiling.

The panic holds true. In fact, it only holds stronger, clutching her stomach like a tumor has been growing inside her and now has reached capacity. Her breath begins to pulsate, weaken, and frazzle. “I’ll be... in the bathroom,” she manages to stammer out.

She needs to grab the walls to support herself, to push her forward. What is that lesson Nathan taught all those years ago? She tries to remember. To stay calm in front of a crowd. But she cannot remember. Her mind is too scattered, her will too broken.

She nearly trips into her porcelain bathtub, but she grabs onto the sink to stabilize. She kicks the door closed. The space is lit only by a tiny window in the corner of the room, hidden above the shower. Only that thin, dim light and her uneven breath establishes life in the room. The darkness feels good, the darkness feels right. She is afraid of what the light could bring.

She looks up. Those mirrors. Those mirrors.

Sally looks into the mirror and the mirror behind her looks at her too and that reflection stares at her reflection which stares at her reflection which stares at her reflection, staring and staring and staring forever and forever, forever, never to end, and she looks into the mirror and the mirror behind her looks at her too which stares at her reflection which stares at her reflection. Infinite reflections stare against reflections.

Each reflection is dim. They all carry her uneven breath; they all look haggard. Their noses look bigger than normal, curved like that of a caricatured witch. Millions all have an ugly pink acne scar on the bottom of their right cheek. Fat cheeks, messy hair. All fools, all idiots. She hates staring at them—all of them, every one of them—but she cannot stop staring at them, for she is transfixed by her utter disgust in them. They are her enemies in countless droves, millions. Yes. Yes. They are disgusting. Repulsive. Evil. Awful. All of them. They are fat, ugly, weak, stupid, terrible. Millions, billions of them, all of them broken humans, worthy of nothing. Utter trash. She hates how they move with

her, how they follow her every step. No more. No more of them.

They must be destroyed.

She gazes wildly around the bathroom. There. She rises onto the tips of her toes and rips the shower curtain rod from the walls. It snaps off quickly, sending her flying back, and whips against her arm. She glances. Skin has opened, spilling red into gray, but she ignores the pain. She turns to the mirrors one final time. Those awful, awful mirrors. Two parallel mirrors working in concert to destroy her. Now they will be destroyed.

She whips the rod and smacks the front mirror head-on. It splits in two, a large bottom piece sliding off the into the sink while the top crackles into shards.

She turns around and slams the other mirror in its center. The impact vibrates out, rippling through the glass, sending out cracks like shockwaves. Some pieces fall to the floor, most of it holds. She hits it a second time. It shatters entirely. It is done.

She throws the rod back into the tub and turns to face the front mirror once more. The reflections are wild and disoriented, refracting on the angles of cobwebs. There is some reflection between mirrors, but only in broken bits, disfigured patterns projecting red and flesh and pink and ugliness. Only half of her face can be made out cleanly. It is her, split into two. Distorted, alone, broken.

She smiles. For the first time in years, the mirrors offer her the reflection she expects to see.

And within those shards, she catches shades of her mother.