
OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR

by Elizabeth Perry

What can such an announcement mean? That sentence of warning shifts in its meaning as you read it, and then afterwards you feel a kind of amnesia—a blank spot—what the mirror blocked out of your view. You find that you've already forgotten how to see the objects.

Answer me quickly: are objects closer in the mirror?

And if he is one of those objects, right now he seems far away.

He has come around the back of the car. What does he look like in this small oval, this dust-spotted chrome frame? The white print of the warning runs across his knees, his belt, his chest. Does the warning mean that he's farther away still, or closer than you had expected?

"Don't you want to get out?"

His chest looks smaller in the rear-view mirror.

I give you these characters, this car, and this warning, "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear." I may have already deceived you.

"Don't you want to get out?"

"In a minute," you say, becoming the woman in the car.

Your name is Janet. Your hair is thick and stands out from your head in great black waves. You are wearing very dark brown stockings. And a green dress. Like a tree, you wonder? Yes, very much like a tree.

How can a tree go dancing?

(You have a minute to consider this. "In a minute," you said and he seems to have granted you that.)

So you think of the wind on a warm summer night. Feel the damp green heat. Think of branches, stirring the air. Move in the wind; hold the wind to you. Think of great strength and an embrace that can encompass a part of the sky, that enormous dark sky. How tall you are, how wild, how strong. Now, get out of the car.

It's winter in Iowa, and you tighten your white scarf before throwing it back over your shoulders. You pull your gray winter coat closer. Tall and wild and strong is suddenly hunched and tight and tentative as you cross the street with him, holding his arm.

"Watch your step," he says.

Ice on the driveway. Ice on the steps. Ice in the drinks inside, when you get there.

"You'll be fine," he says.

You feel the burn of cold night air turning to the stuffed warmth of unwinding woolens in a hallway. Stamp the snow off your boots and some falls against your stocking foot. Balance yourself into those sharp new shoes. Smile. Sniff. Thaw.

Their voices and music rise and curl around the corner to meet you. Laughter teases and subsides, intertwining with woodsmoke and perfume and the odor of bodies. "I'd love a drink." Stretch your arms down in front of you and look at the closely fitting sleeves and then read the backs of your hands. "Yes, I'd love a drink." (Maybe watch your step meant only the walking. You mustn't assume too much about him.)

No one is dancing here, after all, though the room is darkened, and the furniture seems pushed apart.

And the people seem pushed apart. From the hall you imagined them close to each other, gesturing, leaning toward one another in intimacy. You cool toward the room. This was not the party you'd wanted.

Could I make it another party for you? It may be too late for that. We've established this one together, with my words and your reading. We couldn't ever undo it completely. The cancellation would not change your feeling of being cheated. You'd merely distrust me further, and you are already irritated by the way I keep interrupting.

He says nothing, but places the drink in your hand. Curling your fingers around the cool plastic, you feel the bubbles in the tonic bursting against the thin sides of the glass. You look into the ice cubes for pictures or portents. Nothing reveals itself. He is looking at you, and you may wonder if you are being ridiculous.

"How long do we need to stay here?" you murmur.

"Give it a chance."

"Nobody's dancing. I haven't much to say to these people."

"They want to meet you."

"That's not the point."

Has he brought you as a display? She's the one. She reflects well upon me, don't you think? On my open-mindedness. On my taste for the exotic. On my intellect. On my prowess. Don't think about him thinking—it only makes you surly. You could leave by yourself of course, but that would be the end of him. And by himself, he's quite delightful. By himself. In your bed. Then you feel as if you might reinvent the world together. His long pale limbs, his softly faded blue shirt, his hair which you put in little braids that time, his shrug of abandonment when he gives in to joy—all of that, yes, but you didn't choose this. Not the exhibition. Can't you pretend to enjoy the small talk? "Yes, it really does seem to be winter." "No, I don't mind the cold. One gets used to it."

One gets used, of course, to lots of things. Including not minding. A kind of public numbness settles over you in these situations. You have several drinks. When the drinks wear off, when the dullness fades, the return to feeling is like thistleburn and papercuts, like tiny cuts at the edges of your heart, or like the way your numbness to the weather yields to prickling pain when you come inside again. After any party or meeting or gathering of his friends, you may find yourself asking again: Is it worth it? Is he worth it? You can't know.

A woman in red begins laughing. A deep felted sound from the other side of the room. "No. No, no, no, *no*." She is still laughing around her own words. "You can't imagine it—don't pretend you can imagine it."

As if the weight of the party could shift and tip over into her laughter, and although

you haven't heard what was said before, you love this woman—how sure and loud she is. She leans forward and grabs a handful of peanuts. The man and woman who were talking to her both begin to say something at once, then both are quiet, then they defer to each other and mumble. You can't make out the words over the music and the closer conversations.

"Well, what *is* the point, then?" he is saying to you. "Why did you say you'd come? I mean . . ."

"O.k., o.k. I'm here. I'll talk. I'll be nice. And then we can go home later? Or someplace else?"

He nods.

"Who's the loud one in red?"

"Don't know her."

"Yet."

You put down your drink and smile your way through the crowd. People acknowledge you, but have no chance to ask about the weather before you've sifted your way through and into the next group. You've finally learned how to do this without being rude. In one smooth motion, you sit cross-legged at Red's feet. She is chewing another handful of peanuts and looks down at you, expectant.

"Hello." You fill in the pause. "We haven't been introduced. I'm Janet."

"Janet." She says. Laughs. Puts out a small hand.

"And you're . . .?"

"I said."

You look at her.

"Janet," she explains.

You laugh yourself then at this unexpected match, and she laughs, and your talk together swirls up into eddying sets of words and phrases like "two for one" and "make mine a double," with which you tease and delight each other and give yourselves some sense of your own fallibility. One can't understand another, but we come close? We have these sweet near misses? Is that it?

We have these sweet near misses before we go soaring off into the darkness again. For a moment in this conversation you and red Janet seem to agree. About men, and what they think they want. About parties, and performances, and just playing around. About the impossibility of understanding one another in the end. And of course as soon as that's been said, about impossibility, though in not so many words, you are hurtling past each other, true to your own directions. If you imagine your self is contained in your own difference, you may feel relief not to have connected. Not to have had that absolute deadly overlap in this place.

Perhaps you have been confusing understanding with identity, but now you are lonely and the room is warm. Will you leave?

Which near misses? Which you have I been writing about? The near miss of you-who-are-temporarily-Janet-in-a-green-dress and this other Janet in red? Or am I writing of you, reading, and the Janet I've made out of you? But let's try to keep going.

Someone has turned up the music.

You stand up to get out of the way of an awkward dancer, to get out of the now-dull conversation with Janet, to get another drink perhaps. This has all been done

before. You see him between the bodies of the crowd and he has been looking for you. "See? Dancing. I said we could go to this party and dance." He says none of this aloud, but you read it in his face. You could pretend it's too late, you could ignore him, you could just get another drink and then make him take you home. You could still win this argument. If you were willing to give up the pleasure of dancing. But abstract and deferred pleasures—winning small struggles of wills—those pleasures mean less. Now. Even if you somehow felt they ought to matter. Once. Winning is not even a word now. Already the cadence structures your thought. Once. Your steps. Now. Your gestures. Once. Your pulse. Now.

"Let's."

"Dance?"

"Dance."

In this darkened room you catch hands lightly and move toward each other and then together toward an empty space shaped by the people in motion around it. Move into that space you shape together, deftly teasing the air, testing responses. Are you together? It seems you are. Spinning toward and catching back, an arm (whose) a foot (his), a tipped head and a silent laugh. Dancing. Dancing can be like this with him. Tonight. If you thought in words as your bodies can move together, what wouldn't be possible? You fool with the choices and cadence and push pull of rhythm and stepped punctuation—sweep all into motion, from motion, emotion. Dancing. Even the word moves forward, then back again. Say it. Step it. Dance it. Dancing.

Watch his long limbs build space into motion. His hands and his chest, near but not touching, bring warmth to your skin. His look catches yours and gives it back in fragments—fragments which multiply fractions of gestures, splintering mirrorlike moments and doubling time. Watch his long limbs build space into motion.

But the music, that other element, finds its sudden end.

As always you are caught before you were ready. As always you wonder if you have gone too far. As always he seems to have been prepared for the ending before you were. If only you could learn to anticipate conclusions.

I know you're impatient. So what happens? You think that this is the moment to break it off with him and it isn't, after all? This is the moment the story might have ended?

Or you thought it wasn't, but it is.

Was that printed warning even true? Maybe objects in the mirror *aren't* closer than they appear. He seems small to you at times because he *is* small. Tiny. You didn't get out of the car after all. You're still where you were when all of this started.

Sometimes you wonder about reading.