

MIRRORED

[Diagnosis]

Why did you move the mirror?

The mother's voice echoed, bouncing against each corner of her skull. She stared down. Her right thumb pressed against the back of her left hand. The mark stayed—a thumbprint sinking into her rubber-like skin, which held the dimple for a long moment before easing itself back.

I need that mirror. Jing thought, looking up from her left hand to see her own reflection. *I need to see myself when I get dressed.* That was the hollow justification for her mother, when she moved the dressing mirror from the front door, where her father's shoes used to sit by the mat. The house had since grown into a tightening fish net—every side constrained but porous, wrapping around the two figures within.

She now saw those diluted eyes of the “*strange stubborn child*”, like an engulfing cluster of darkness, gazing directly back into her own. She touched the edges of her cheekbone. Beneath her palm, she felt the elasticity of her own body, melting and reforming. But, as she examined the person in the mirror, who, too, touches their own cheek, she found their face fully intact. No indents. No ripples. No delayed returns.

She first noticed the pliancy of her own skin while showering a week ago, upon seeing an indented sag on her arm curving the streams of water that ran down her body. It was a hallucination, she thought, veiled in the heated vapor of the bathroom. But soon the symptoms became more regular: those dimples spread until every touch found her body an uncured piece of rubber.

When Jing notified her mom about the situation, she appeared terrified. Her eyes were wide, lips quivering. She was already pulling her phone from her pocket. Her fingers were unsteady, but they moved fast—rehearsed, like she'd been waiting for something to go wrong.

“Jing? May I come in?” Her mom's voice came from the door.

Jing heard the turnings of the handle and chose not to reply.

“I'm here with Master Luo. Remember? I told you we are expecting the *Feng Shui* Master today.”

“Hi, Master,” Jing retrieved herself from the reflection and gave a bow-nod to Master Luo with a smile. She quickly glanced at her mother and covered the indent on her left hand with the other hand.

When Mrs. Liu first asked her about resorting to superstitious practices for her “disease”, Jing merely shrugged it off—she knew better than to alter decisions that her mother had already made. *What could be worse?* She thought. But now, as his unfamiliar figure approached, Jing's body betrayed a small quiver.

Master Luo was a clean figure. His face was clean and well-shaven. His hair was short, dyed a very dark brown. A pair of bright eyes shone behind those clear glasses—lenses like two

small mirrors that never wavered. Jing caught those eyes glimpsing at the dressing mirror—*What is he going to say to mom? What has he already said?*

Luo re-adjusted his posture, set down his leather messenger bag, and returned Jing's gesture with a polite opening, "Hello, I've heard about your symptoms from your mother—so melting and reforming body tissues? Do you mind if I do a quick examination?"

Jing nodded, arms crossed.

Master Luo set his leather bag on the desk and donned a pair of thin cotton gloves.

"Please, sit," he said.

Jing obeyed. He touched the back of her hand first. The skin yielded under his fingertip. He did not recoil, only waited, watching the surface ease itself back to level.

"Does it hurt?"

"No. Just feels strange."

He nodded and pressed again—at the wrist, the forearm, the side of her neck—measuring with the same slow patience one uses to test the ripeness of fruit. Each place he touched sank, held, returned. When he finished, he turned his attention to the room itself.

He walked once around the bed, tracing the perimeter with his gaze. His eyes paused on the mirror that faced the bed, tall and narrow, catching the dim window light.

"Who placed this in her bedroom?" he asked the mother.

"She moved it," Mrs. Liu replied. "A few weeks ago."

He stepped closer until his reflection covered up her own. For a moment, the three of them—old man, girl, glass—stood in perfect alignment.

The mirror's surface shivered slightly.

"There," he murmured. "It's begun to breathe with you."

Jing looked at him, answering with a hesitant delay, "What do you mean?"

He didn't answer at once. Instead, he removed his glasses, wiped them on a handkerchief, and replaced them with deliberate care.

"When the living self begins to lose its boundary," he said finally, "something answers from the other side. It's not malice. Just a will for balance. Mirrors invite guests who crave form."

He looked again at her hands, at the faint dimples still closing.

"Your body is giving permission to what you see to be more than a reflection," he continued.

Jing wanted to say something, but she lost it as soon as her mom's shaking voice cut in.

"You mean a ghost?" Mrs. Liu asked.

He smiled slightly. "We call it 镜中鬼—*Mirror Ghost*. A patient would call it comfort."

He circled the mirror once, fingers trailing its wooden frame. Then he stood back from the mirror, his reflection swallowed by the dim light.

"Some shadows, or ghosts if that's what you prefer, don't haunt people at all," he said, "They 寄生—live as parasites in objects. Mirrors are their favorite. A mirror can house a hundred faces and still appear empty. When such a spirit settles, it waits for the living to

acknowledge it. That recognition is the key. Once you've seen it, even faintly, it begins to see you back."

Mrs. Liu's voice trembled. "Then can we just move it? Throw it out? Smash it? Can we do that? Does that work—?"

Master Luo shook his head slowly. "Too late. The moment your daughter sensed it, they became connected. Not possession, not exactly—共生, coexistence. The mirror feeds on her awareness, and she, on its stability. They now coexist even if she can't consciously grasp it yet. It would be detrimental to strip the two apart without preparation—quite frankly, I'm not sure what's the worst that could happen."

That was an empty ring for Jing, so she kept pressing into her arms like a self-hug, leaving large indents here and there. Mrs. Liu looked at her daughter and slapped her hand off her arms.

"So she's trapped?" Mrs. Liu asked.

"Not trapped," the master said. "Entangled."

Jing saw her mom's trembling, "Then—what should I do?"

"Five days of correction," he said, stepping back from the mirror. "No removal, no disruption. The objective is controlled recalibration, not eradication. Each day, she'll be introduced to a single behavioral parameter. The rules build sequentially; adherence must be continuous. The progression has to be gradual—too abrupt an intervention could fracture the adaptation we're trying to stabilize. By the fifth day, equilibrium should be restored."

From his leather case, he withdrew five small, silk-embroidered pouches and aligned them in a precise row across the freshly wiped desk. Each was sealed with fine thread and numbered in ink.

"She's to open one each morning," he instructed. "The directive for that day will be inside. No substitutions, no acceleration. The order itself is part of the treatment."

[Instructions]

"Jing?" Her mother's voice came from the doorway—gentle but edged with insistence. "Can I come in?"

The doorknob turned before Jing could answer. Mrs. Liu entered with a tray, steam rising from beneath the lid. "The master said to keep the body grounded. Warm food helps."

She set the tray down on the desk beside the bed and lifted the lid—two steamed buns, slick with oil, the smell of meat and scallion thick in the air.

Jing's throat contracted, stomach churning to a familiar rhythm.

Yesterday's pouch was now emptied. It had been small, silk the color of faded ivory, stitched with pale cranes that seemed to move when she tilted it. Inside was a folded note—**Rule 1: Dissolve the powder in warm water. Finish entirely.**

Her mother's trembling hands from yesterday morning coincided with her figure now. Jing replayed her mother's movements in her head—how she measured each scoop as if

salvation depended on precision. *The entirety*, she whispered then, scraping the last grain into the cup. The water turned cloudy and then clear again, smoothing like skin after a touch. Jing drank it up under that burning gaze. The taste was sweet, almost tender at first, before it sharpened halfway down, leaving a bright ache behind her ribs. The sweetness had clung to her tongue all afternoon. The congee that followed—raw egg stirred in before it cooled—had turned heavy halfway down her throat. Later, she'd stood over the toilet, watching it swirl away, pale and grainy, until even the smell was gone.

"The pouch," her mother reminded her, drawing her back to the present.

The second pouch waited where her mother had left it, but its color appeared different. The ivory silk now carried a gray sheen, as though it had absorbed something from the air. There were several cranes embroidered on its surface. But they were stiff, their wings half-folded as if pressed down mid-flight.

Jing untied the dark-green drawstrings. The silk felt faintly warm, as if it had been breathing through the night. Inside was a narrow slip of paper:

Rule 2: Hold still when troubled. Stillness restores order.

Her mother's shoulders eased. "See? Not so bad. Just quietness. You can do that. We are doing great, aren't we?"

They sat before the desk. Jing tore one bun open, and the scent hit her full in the face: hot grease, animal sweetness, the faintest trace of iron. She hesitated, then bit. The dough clung to her teeth, the filling oozing warmth that glided too slowly down her throat.

The mirror across the room caught her movement. Its surface seemed shallower than before—closer, like the glass had thickened. Her reflection waited, composed, clean.

She straightened her back to match it.

"Better," her mother said, "Keep still like that. The note said stillness is key to composure. Maybe that's what Master Luo meant by restoring the balance and driving away the ghost."

Jing tried, focusing on each motion—the tightening of muscles, the hinging of those joints. She felt her elbows soften against the table. A faint ache gathered in her arms, not pain exactly, but *something* was slipping away from her hyper-focused, attentive mind.

She pressed her palms flat, watching the dimples linger too long before easing out again.

"Calm," her mother said. "It's about balance. Didn't Master Luo say that the spirit follows emotion?"

The words brushed against her ear. Her face twitched.

Jing looked to the mirror for reassurance. Her reflection sat perfectly still, its hands dry, its skin smooth. Jing blinked.

The reflection didn't. A fraction later, it blinked once—slow, deliberate—then exhaled. The mirror *fogged* from the inside.

Jing's stomach clenched. "Mom," she said, voice faint.

“Don’t talk,” she whispered, “You’ll lose focus.” She patted Jing’s shoulder, and Jing felt her flesh form and reform at that touch beneath her shirt—she wondered if her mother sensed it, too.

Jing turned back to the mirror. The fog pulsed once, in time with her heartbeat. Then came another breath—audible this time, a thin sound like someone sighing through water. Her body responded before she could think; her spine stiffened, her skin tightening to hold shape. The bun slipped from her fingers, leaving a grease print on the desk.

The reflection dropped her bun, too, but she looked steady, serene. Then her head tilted—just slightly—to the right.

Jing flinched. She reached for her throat, her hand sinking faintly into her collarbone before the flesh rebounded. The elasticity had worsened—

“Don’t do that!” Mrs. Liu’s agitated voice cut Jing’s thoughts short, pulling her hand off her own body, “Hold still. Please.”

“Hold still,” Jing echoed, not sure whether she was quoting the rule or her mother. She picked up the bun and took another bite. Meat, oil, and the greasy wrap pushed through her throat.

The mirror’s glow shifted, dimming as though the room inside it had deepened. The reflection straightened in return, movements calm and composed as usual.

“That’s good,” she said softly, urging on, “You see? The rule works. Master Luo said gradual improvement, remember?”

Jing didn’t respond. She stared at the mirror until her vision blurred from strain. Her reflection’s mouth opened—not in speech, but in a quiet imitation of breath. The fog gathered again, soft and rhythmic, breathing through glass.

When she finally pushed back from the table, she found prints across her body, darkening against the room’s dim light. The surface cooled, and the marks disappeared.

Her mother rose to take the tray. “You did well,” she said. “We’ll count that as progress.”

After she left, Jing sat alone. The mirror’s glow shimmered, then flared once, like a lung expanding. The reflection’s lips moved silently.

The breath fogged the glass again—this time from both sides.

[Movement]

The third pouch was lighter than the others—its silk nearly translucent, the embroidery dulled, as if the thread had bled into the fabric overnight. The cranes this time were fully spread, wings poised in symmetrical balance. Jing ran her thumb along their edges; the texture was smooth, almost oily.

Her mother entered, almost at the exact same moment as the two days before.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well? A good night of sleep is always important,” she said, forcing a bright smile that ran counter to her drooping eyelids.

Jing’s back muscles tightened.

Her mother walked to the desk. “Should we open the third pouch now?”

She spoke while loosening the drawstring. Inside lay a folded note. She unfolded the slip and read it aloud, her voice careful, as if any mistake in tone might alter the meaning.

Rule 3: Align the body to align the spirit. When balance falters, return to form.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Jing stared at the ink—thin, almost fading at the edges.

Her mother broke the silence first. “That sounds... good, doesn’t it? Balance. Form.” She glanced toward the mirror, her reflection looking paler than the real her. “The master must mean exercise—stretching, maybe.”

Upon hearing no objections from Jing, her words quickened with relief, “Wait here.”

She turned to Jing’s closet and dragged out a couple of plastic boxes, making an unpleasant noise. She reached for something behind those boxes. When she returned, she was carrying two rolled yoga mats, their corners softened with age.

“We’ll do this together. It’s been so long since you last did any kind of relieving exercises. The master said movement helps the *qi* flow. Let’s go to the living room.”

Jing looked at the mats, then at the mirror. “I’ll stay here,” she said. “I need to see my form. Form is important in exercises.”

“The living room has more space—”

“I’ll stay here,” Jing repeated, quieter this time.

Mrs. Liu pronounced a loud sigh, dropping the mats onto the floor. She then bent down awkwardly and rolled one mat to Jing.

Jing rolled it out beside the mirror. She pressed the corners flat carefully, but they always curled up as soon as she lifted her hand. In her peripheral vision, she saw Mrs. Liu doing the same thing.

“Let’s begin,” Mrs. Liu said, forcing steadiness into her voice, finally giving up on fully flattening the mat, “We’ll follow the rule exactly.”

They began with the simplest poses—mountain, forward bend, and half stretch.

Mrs. Liu’s voice guided the pace. “Straighten your back... hold... breathe... balance is the key.”

Her tone was soft, but Jing heard a strain beneath it.

Jing lifted her arms slowly. The skin along her elbows stretched and thinned like warm wax, then reformed when she steadied them. Her reflection in the mirror looked smoother, firmer, the joints cleaner. She adjusted her stance to match that of the other body—spine taut, jaw still—until she could no longer tell which version was correcting the other.

“Good,” Mrs. Liu said. “You’re keeping up well.”

Jing nodded. She focused on holding shape, not trembling, not sagging, not melting. Her knees began to soften; the space between her bones and flesh seemed to loosen. She pressed her feet harder against the mat to feel where her body ended.

Mrs. Liu, behind her, moved through the same sequence. Now and then, Jing caught glimpses of her mother’s reflection—hesitant, watchful—turning not toward her, but toward the

mirror, sometimes studying Jing's reflection, other times examining her own. Finally, she fixed her eyes on Jing's very posture from behind.

Jing swallowed, shifting away from potential eye contact, and focused on her own body in the mirror. She folded forward; the movement felt too fluid, her spine bending in a continuous, boneless wave. Her stomach pressed into her thighs. Her reflection followed—except the reflection's head tilted slightly upward, lips curved in a serene half-smile, as if savoring the motion.

A chill climbed her neck. She rose too fast; her vision blurred.

Mrs. Liu noticed and steadied her shoulder. "Slowly. You're doing great. Don't rush it."

Jing nodded—a mere, quick, reflexive gesture. She exhaled, trying to find stillness. For a moment, the room felt calm. Then she saw the reflection lag—half a beat behind, mimicking delay. Its knees wobbled, then locked. The air near the glass thickened, heavy as breath held too long.

"I think you look better already," Mrs. Liu said. "You see? It's working. I feel calmer too."

Her reflection in the mirror smiled, and so did the one beside it.

When her mother finally left, the room settled into silence. The air was wet with the smell of dust and sweat. Jing sank to her knees, facing the mirror. Her limbs trembled, pliant. She lifted one arm experimentally, and it bent too far back—elastic, like a reed in water.

The mirror ghost bent with her.

She straightened, heart pounding. The reflection straightened, too.

She tilted forward at the waist, deeper and deeper, until her face was upside down, smiling from the wrong angle.

Jing stumbled backward. The bed frame caught her hip; pain flickered sharp and brief. When she looked again, the mirror showed only her normal shape—breathing hard, hair clinging to her temples.

Her skin felt soft, formless, almost dissolving.

She dropped her shoulders, forcing her voice steady.

"I can do it," she muttered to herself.

The mirror-Jing said nothing, but her lips curled up.

And in that moment, she hated herself for saying it, for pretending belief, for needing to. Even the hatred itself felt repulsive—

Before that thought could spiral, she covered up the reflection with her hands. Pressing down. Smudging prints. Breathing hard.

[Correction]

The fourth pouch was almost weightless. Its silk had grown thin and pale, the sheen drained to a faint gray. The cranes embroidered across it faced one another in mirrored pairs, their beaks nearly touching, into an unrealized kiss. The symmetry was too exact—unsettling in

its precision. When Jing brushed her thumb across one wing, the silk returned her touch with a soft engulfment, as if it had been waiting for her all along.

Mrs. Liu entered softly, the faint rustle of her slippers breaking the quiet. “Two more before the end,” she said, and hope strained itself at the end of each syllable, “We just have to hold on a little longer.”

Jing sat on the edge of the bed, the pouch resting in her palm. Her mother took the pouch from her, pulling a weak smile. She untied the silk thread with ceremonial care. Inside was a folded slip of paper, thin enough for the ink to ghost through.

Mrs. Liu read it aloud again.

Rule 4: To keep your form, return affection to the gaze that gives it.

The letters seemed to stretch toward and recoil upon every corner of the paper, yellow and fragile.

Mrs. Liu’s mouth curved faintly, her eyes soft with something like relief. She brushed her fingers across the paper as though the words might bless her through touch. She held the paper closer to her eyes and gave the pouch to Jing.

Jing only watched, the slip of silk warming slowly in her palm.

Her mother read the rule again under her breath, nodding as if the meaning deepened each time. In the mirror behind her, Jing saw both of them reflected—the mother’s lips moving.

“That’s a good one,” Mrs. Liu murmured. “It means you’re ready to welcome balance back.”

Jing forced a silent smile.

She sat before the mirror, folding her legs neatly beneath her. Her reflection met her halfway, poised, waiting. She lifted her chin, tried a small smile—half expecting the familiar delay, the half-second lag she’d come to dread.

But the reflection smiled too—exactly, instantly. No pause. No distance.

For a heartbeat, the precision felt like relief. Then it began to feel worse. Every blink, every motion repeated in perfect rhythm, too smooth to be human. The exactness pressed on her chest until she realized she was holding her breath to match her own figure’s tightness. Her own face began to feel like an imitation. The reflection wasn’t following her anymore—it was keeping her still.

“That’s it,” her mother said behind her. “Keep smiling.”

The tone was soft, but something inside it dragged on like a thin needle running across a scratched music disc in circles. Jing thought she heard another voice—the same words, whispered from within the mirror. The two tones folded together. Mixed. Mingled. Breeding a bloated clot just beneath the skin, surfacing against her lower belly.

Her lips trembled, the corners of her mouth twitching under strain. The reflection’s smile didn’t break. Its steadiness made her skin crawl. Somewhere inside the glass, she thought she heard laughter—Gentle? Kind? Loving?

No, it was mocking all the same. She wanted to move, to shatter the symmetry, to make the reflection falter.

She saw her hand rise. Saw the mirror split. Saw her blood blooming through the glass like paper-thin petals scattered underwater.

“Almost done,” her mother’s voice veiled that of the shattering glass, bouncing off each mirror fragment all over the floor, dancing about the reddening shimmers.

“Don’t ruin it. Smile for me, Jing. We’re nearly healed.”

The voice lost its body somewhere between thought and air.

Smile for me—Jing—smile—

The name turned liquid in her head, seeping through the corners of her eyes, her nostrils, her mouth, her ears. When she looked up, the reflection was already mouthing her mother’s phrases—perfectly timed, perfectly smooth—as if the two of them had been practicing for years. The sound was familiar—the same tone that had once adjusted her posture at the dinner table, corrected the curve of her handwriting, fixed her smile before relatives came to visit.

The mirror beside her caught it all, breathing faintly, the glass rippling as if remembering every correction ever spoken into it. When she’d brought it here, she hadn’t known why—only that she wanted it close. But now, each word her mother spoke seemed to spread across its shattered surface, pressing form into her melting skin. The room filled with her mother’s voice, webbing around her in glinting strands she could neither break nor escape.

Mrs. Liu’s voice pulled the mirror back together through invisible strings.

Everything was still intact. Unchanged.

“You’re doing so well,” she said, and moved closer, her hand trembling as it hovered, then settled lightly on Jing’s head. Her gentle gesture weighed down.

“You’ve worked so hard, my darling. You’re nearly there,”

She was stroking through her daughter’s hair, strands of which tangled upon her fingers. The motion steadied her breathing; Jing could feel the rhythm of it through her scalp, small and trembling.

“You’re doing so well,” her mother murmured in repetition, “Just like that.” She smiled at her daughter through the mirror. Her motions steadier. Breaths more controlled.

Jing sat still, her neck stiffening beneath her mother’s palm.

The mirror hummed faintly, as if absorbing them both.

That night, the mirror blinked with dizzy glows, as if lit from within by the rhythm of two breathing bodies. Jing lay awake. She smelled the metallic sweetness of the powder, the rawness of the congee, and the greasiness of those buns. All pulsing with the blood that she never spilled.

In her dream that night, she was gathering pieces of herself into a glass cup she’d made by hand—a vessel just wide enough to hold what had melted. The surface rippled, neither solid nor liquid, and she measured it carefully, afraid to spill. From somewhere above the rim, a voice—soft, familiar—whispered, *Perfect. Just the right amount.*

[Equilibrium]

Mrs. Liu knocked, turning the knob with the other hand. The handle felt cool against her palm.

The curtains were drawn as always, but a thin slit of morning light cut through the gap, laying a single bright stripe across the floor. Jing sat at the end of it, cross-legged before the mirror, the fifth pouch opened beside her, the note resting in her hand.

For a moment, Mrs. Liu only watched. The air felt unusually clean, precise.

The pouch was on her desk. Its silk was pale again, nearly white. Only one crane remained embroidered at the center, its wings pressed tight, its neck stretched upward in flawless alignment. The thread caught dawn's light like a pin.

"You opened it," Mrs. Liu said, her voice barely above breath. It wasn't accusation so much as disbelief.

Jing turned slightly toward her. Her face was half in shadow; the light behind her struck the mirror instead, illuminating her reflection.

"I felt ready," she said simply. Her fingers smoothed the folded paper once, twice, before lifting it.

She read aloud, calm and deliberate, as if reciting something memorized:

Rule 5: Continue to anticipate hope. Learn to teach yourself love and happiness.

Mrs. Liu exhaled—a small, uneven sound.

"That's good," she said, stepping closer. "That means it's almost over. You've done so well, my darling."

Jing nodded, her smile stiff but steady. "I think I understand now."

The light shifted. It slipped across the floor until it landed on Mrs. Liu's feet, leaving her daughter's face entirely in the shade.

Mrs. Liu hesitated. Something about the good news unsettled her. The mirror had always seemed slightly clouded before; now it shone too sharply, like glass just washed. She looked down at the pouch again, the lone crane frozen mid-flight, the threads straining at the edges.

A small part of her wanted to snatch the note away and read it—re-read it—for herself. But Jing's stillness held her there. Her daughter's posture was so composed, so certain, that to disturb it felt like sacrilege.

Mrs. Liu lowered herself onto the floor beside her. The boards creaked faintly. "Master Luo will come soon. He'll see how much better you look."

Jing smiled again. "He'll see we followed everything."

The words eased something in Mrs. Liu. She reached out, brushing a strand of hair from her daughter's temple. The skin was warm and soft under her fingertips.

"Yes, I'm so glad," she hummed, "We've only got each other now. I'm just so glad that you're doing better..."

The room was veiled in a fragile air, its four walls drawn tight like a suspended fish net she dared not disturb. So she steadied herself. Straightened her spine. Adjusted her weight until she could almost believe the net had settled — level, precise, without slack. Her eyes flicked to

the mirror. There, the two of them sat together in the same strip of light, mother and daughter perfectly still, faces overlapping where the glare met shadow.

“Just a few more hours,” she whispered, more to herself than to the girl. “Then we’ll know for sure.”

The room stayed silent.

The mirror held them both.