

Mirror Man

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There has been this thought that has lingered in my mind. It stuck with me since that day. Since the beginning of man. War has existed for thousands of millenniums alongside us. When the first man committed murder. Sticks and stones were used to wage wars in our primal age. As periods of humankind progressed. Old men became the shepherds, while the young boys were cattle sent to their damnation for a nation. Armies trained soldiers with discipline, but can you really instill discipline when it comes to taking another's life? At the end of the day, I ended up surviving. Forgotten by the country I served under. They don't know what I witnessed. I look at the bureaucracy that is my country who sent me there with disgust. Questioning why we did what we did. And how pointless it all really was. My head is splitting with doubt about everything I have gone through. And I want it to stop.

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The floor's square tiles were cracked and chipped. The tiles were ivory in color, left in a yellow hue. Dry mud caked all over the cramped bathroom floor. The toilet, sulfur pigmentation and scuffed; the bolts loose on the base. The shower tub's glaze peeling off with rust that will soon take its place. The sink is soiled, left with countless amounts of cigarette butts and ash, leaving the smell of copper in the air.

Across from the bathroom, an equally horrid bedroom. The sounds of white noise can be heard from the busted television.

“Here at Channel 33 news, we are currently witnessing the withdrawal of the U.S. military at Kabul Airport in Afghanistan. Many Afghanis are chasing down one of the last C-17 aircraft from this pullout. All seeking refuge away from the Taliban.”

The TV continues its droning.

The bathroom mirror was the only appliance not damaged or

dirtied. The silver glass gleamed brightly from every angle. It reflects the exact image of whoever is gazing upon it. With the sound of frustration, the mirror is suddenly hit with the quick impact of a clenched fist. Shiny shards and jagged cracks reflect the crater that is left on the surface of the looking glass. The fist stays its hand on the broken surface. Blood crawling between the cracks. The faucet handle turned, running water. Red essence dripped onto the clear liquid. Swallowed into the void.

The damaged soul bear witness to his misery. He asked himself, why is he having this feeling now? He stared at the shattered mirror, disgusted with his peering scowl. The hand slowly recoiled back from the damaged reflection. Flesh wounds and silver shards made themselves known on the knuckles.

The bleeding hand is put under the sink. The pain was baptized by the running water.

Mateo was a young Hispanic man. In his mid 20's. Hair was black, grown out and frizzy. His complexion was a caramel skin tone. His face was a mix of maturity, rage, and stress, while retaining his youth under all the strain.

Draped over Mateo's shoulders are his green Army field jacket from his time in service. Patches from 1st Battalion of the 75th Ranger Regiment, and medals from deployment adorn the jacket. Underneath the outerwear was a black tank top, soiled and damp with dank sweat.

Mateo's smartphone suddenly rang from the front pocket of his grey cargo pants. He didn't bother to check and confirm the caller. But he knew who was reaching out. Simon always looked out for his brother-in-arms. They maintained contact after their tour of Afghanistan.

Simon was an African American man. A bit older and more put together than Mateo. They both served under that same unit that is 1st Ranger Battalion. Both promised to live around Carmel, Indiana after getting out of the Army, for what they've gone through. Mateo in recent months has been speaking less in phone

calls and conversations with Simon overtime. Both promised if one doesn't answer, assume the worst.

The phone's ringing soon became silent.

Mateo began to move with purpose into the disheveled bedroom. Looking under the bed frame, he grabbed a bulky, black plastic case and laid it upon the mattress. The trembling hands unclashed the case. A lethal weapon with a matte, smooth design and mechanical function was in full display. The tool's finish was coyote brown in color, perfect and polished. Still reflecting the distant deserts of Kandahar.

Mateo gripped the weapon and walked back into the bathroom. Checking if the weapon was ready and loaded. He stared long at the broken image of himself. One last time.

“Sergeant Fields? What are you doing?”

A sudden omniscient voice can be heard but not seen. The voice was deep and echoed throughout the bathroom's claustrophobic walls. It reverbed with sounds of multiple voices speaking in unison into one. Mateo's gears in his head only gave out the only response he could muster. None. Dread took over instead.

“Wha—”

The shattered mirror with its broken shards began to shake with violence and morphed back into its former pristine state. The reflective surface returned with no crack in sight. The mirror in its silver reflection then spawned in a shadowed humanoid silhouette behind the mirror. It was covered in silky smoke with fire embers floating and drifting around the figure's presence. The silhouette was bulky in its proportions. The dark outline of the figure looked to be wearing a full set of tactical military attire. The assumed head had no eyes visible, only clouded by dark fog bellowing out. The mysterious figure spoke again.

“Sergeant Fields. Do you see me?”

Mateo's instincts kicked in. His body is shot full of adrenaline. Gripping the weapon. With conviction, pulling the slide of the firearm and release. Aiming at the mirror. Three feet away from the reflection, the pistol's sights align with the shadowy being. The trigger is pulled. Primed bullets were struck by the firing pin. The violent rounds met their target but got lost in the void of the silhouette.

Multiple sounds of clicking from the pistol trigger filled the silence of the bathroom. The firearm ran out of its fury. The man in the mirror spoke again.

"You still retained your training, Sergeant Fields."

"W-What the hell are you!?"

"...You, Sergeant. I'm where you think of yourself to be. Still in that desert."

"T-This can't be real! You aren't fucking real!"

"You know this to be true, Sergeant. That I'm very real, to you."

Mateo still has his iron pointed at the figure. Strangely, being referred to his rank from his time in service evaporated the feeling of despair and gave him the confidence to speak up and argue with the reflection.

"It's Mateo, shitbag! I don't want to be addressed by that fucking rank anymore!"

"But I see you still stew in the past. I can see it in your fickle mind. In your nightmares. Of the things you witnessed. Asking yourself the same damn question. What could I have done differently on that day? Could I have seen it coming before it happened?"

As the shadow kept Mateo in a state of petrification. Distant sound of a roaring motor engine traveled ever closer to Mateo's

house. The screeching of heavy-duty tires can be heard through the walls of the household. Mateo already knows it is Simon rushing to check if his battle didn't clock out early. Sounds of twisting of the doorknob transitioning into loud and heavy slamming can be heard from the front door. Mateo glanced out for his moment to escape and sprinted out of the bathroom. Closing in on the front door to let Simon in to assist with this supernatural encounter.

“You can't run away from what's about to happen, Mateo!”

The silhouette reached his arm out through the pristine mirror. Into reality. The arm stretched out as if it was reaching out from the ocean. Leaving chromatic waves on the surface of the mirror. The limb slithered through the bathroom, bedroom, setting its fangs around Mateo's right arm. Mateo's forced stop from the shadow's death grip caused him to drop his empty pistol and trip onto the hardened wood floor of his living room. He looked to see that this apparition was physically real. Mateo was soon dragged through the household, attempting to loosen the grip of the black limb with his strength.

The front door went from wood thudding into cracking. The swinging open of the door was distinct. Heavy footsteps close in on Mateo. Simon's eyes witnessed the predicament.

“What the fuck Mat!? What the hell is going on!?”

Simon rushed to grab ahold of Mateo's torso to pull him to freedom; the added strength was insignificant. Simon found himself being dragged along, unwilling to let go of his friend in need. Both men were gritting their teeth, arms flexed, legs buckled, sweat beading. They can see that they are being dragged back into the bathroom. Toward and into the mirror. Mateo's arm sunk through the reflection; the rest of his figure quickly drowned into the silver tar.

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Mateo opened his eyes to a cramped and metal interior. Green lights piercing from above. Many men adorned in muted

grayish-green military camo and advanced gear, sit side by side in a long, squeezed tight line. Sounds of rhythmic pulses of blade cuts can be heard from outside the interior. The atmosphere of the room felt weighty and unbalanced. The black MH-47G Chinook was headed to its destination for a night operation.

A realization soon worms its way into Mateo's mind. He's returned.

Mateo stood and frantically looked at his figure to be wearing his military fatigues, helmet with full battle rattle. His M4 rifle slung around his shoulders. The men all looked puzzled at this action. His commander walked up to him.

“Hey Sergeant, is something the matter?”

“Yes! I know what's going to fucking happen! This mission is a bust! We need to turn this fucking aircraft around sir!”

The commander looked in confusion. He turned to look at the other soldiers sitting.

“Look Mat. I don't know what is going on with you, but you sit down and let me handle my op.”

“No! No, sir! We are all fucking dead if we let this chopper near that building!”

“Sit down, Sergeant Fields! You are losing it!”

Another soldier quickly stood up and guided Mateo to sit down.

“Hey Sergeant Fields, I know you got the jitters, but it'll be fine. We got this.”

“No Sergeant Pattinson. We don't 'got this'. I know. They won't make it.”

The dark voice of the mirror man creeps into Mateo's mind.

“They won’t listen or change their minds. This night has been set in stone.”

The commander walks toward the tail end of the interior and pulls a large lever near the ramp of the craft. The ramp slowly opens to reveal the arid terrain under dusk. He gives the order.

“We’re almost at the destination! Remember to rope down at my command! Quick and easy! We’ll be above the target in one minute!”

All stood, lined up. Ready to deploy. Mateo was near the front of the line. Still erratic. The Chinook soon hovered in place of the landing zone. The men soon fast roped off the chopper one by one. It was Mateo’s turn. He soon rappelled down from the craft knowing this event, beat for beat. Right on queue, the sound of a loud, high-pressured hiss was quickly traveling toward the helicopter.

Mateo looked up to see the Chinook hit with an explosive projectile and spun uncontrollably from the impact. The mess of metal and flames took Mateo for a ride as he clung to the rope.

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The perception of the world was black for a moment. The sound of crackling from flames was heard through the darkness. Mateo’s vision was blurry, blinking with slow repetition. His vision soon cleared, looking at the arid ground covered with glass, scrap metal, and blood. Ears were ringing, smells of ash and gore floating in the air.

Mateo was stuck under the wreckage of the MH-47G Chinook helicopter. Smoke and dust found themselves in Mateo’s lungs as he breathed and crawled his way out. As Mateo stood, the cut wounds and bruises around his waist made him bend down to lessen the pain. Looking around the black fog of the sandy terrain, under the night. Mateo remembered the ebony smoke from the crash, and where it landed in the middle of the road leading up to the target’s homestead.

“Help! Somebody! Help!”

Mateo limped his way toward the cries for help. He sees a fellow specialist lying on the ground, near the destroyed aircraft.

“Help! Sergeant! Help! It fucking hurts!”

“I’ve got you man; we’ll call in a medevac and get you outta here.”

Upon looking at his condition, both of the specialist’s legs were gone, up to the knees. Mateo quickly checked his med pouch and ties a tourniquet around the ranger’s missing limbs to stop the bleeding and cares for other scrapes and cuts. A hand is placed on Mateo’s shoulder.

“Mateo! I’m one of the few who ain’t hurt too badly! Everyone from the bird is either a casualty from that blast or is raiding the building! You continue helping the man, I’ll call in the cavalry!”

“Roger that Simon!”

Mateo knew the result of his attempts to help the soldier were futile. He looks back at the ranger; his head tilted down with no movement. He shakes the specialist to wake up. Nothing. Mateo grieves for a moment of another loss. He checks to make sure his M4 is still slung around him and limps his way toward the mud-brick homestead. Bullets rang out from the building as Mateo moved closer. Checking if the magazine has rounds; Mateo pulled the charging handle, loaded, and released. The house was dusty and dark; the only way to see was from the muzzle flashes of rifles being shot or having night vision goggles.

A few rangers were able to rope down to engage the target, but with little support. With his NVGs down, Mateo witnessed his comrades lying on the ground of the house as he walked through, some panting in pain while others lie motionless. Mateo can hear footsteps from one of the bedrooms. He readies his M4 and is trained at the bedroom door. The door rapidly opens and a man dressed in a brown tunic and a black turban wielding an AK-47

comes out. The man yells and shoots in the dark. Mateo ducks and falls to the ground, aiming at the man. Rounds struck the man in the chest and neck; he falls with quick movement.

Mateo continued toward the bedroom. Whisper behind his ear from Simon catches him off guard.

“Hey Mat, I called in for support. The bird will be arriving soon. But I don’t think we found our target.”

“I think he’s in this room. Waiting for us to barge in.”

“Okay, we both rush the room and take this fucker out.”

Both men steadily traveled down the hall and kept sight of the bedroom door. The door was ajar from the previous encounter. Glass being stepped on can be heard from the opening. Both know some idea of where their target is hiding. The door is kicked in, and both aim at the corner of a sparse bedroom, pulling their triggers. The man that is their target was hiding behind a shitty wooden table in the corner of the room. As the bullets impact, the corner wall behind him reflects brain matter and gore. The table is covered in countless holes. Simon walks toward the corpse.

“That’s the target. We got the bastard.”

“But. What for? At what cost Simon?”

As Simon turns to look at Mateo. Simon evaporates in front of Mateo’s eyes. The rest of the vivid retrospective is blown away by the desert winds.

Mateo stands in the middle of a dusty road, surrounded by mountains and rugged terrain. Quiet. Empty. Under the moonlit sky of Afghanistan. Mateo could only hear his heartbeat with how still the air stirred. Distant dunes for miles. No end in sight. The only landmark of note to Mateo was a desolate oasis near the road. He stared long at the pond in the middle of a desert.

Sounds of whistling gusts were heard behind Mateo.

“You and Sergeant Pattinson were the only ones who made it in that fateful day.”

“Why. Why am I...”

The shadowed figure took steps closer behind Mateo.

“The mission was a night raid, transporting 15 rangers of 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment to take out a hiding Taliban leader located at an uninteresting mud-brick house at the side of a mountain. It was going to be routine, that’s what the command said. Not knowing how many insurgents are waiting alongside the target. Many died from an unexpected RPG projectile hitting the tail of the Chinook, resulting in a crash. A few died and some survived the firefight to assassinate the leader, but they soon succumbed to their wounds. Leaving you and Simon to remain. This is what you keep reminding yourself. Everyday.”

“I already know. Why did I have to be the one? To remain alive? To be haunted?”

Mateo takes his steps toward the distant oasis. Crunches on the sand are heard with every step taken. The shadow follows behind. Mateo turned his head to glance back at the mirror man.

“You gonna keep following me?”

With no reply from the figure, Mateo turned to continue his walk. Only Mateo’s shadow is cast under the moonlight from the two. Every step taken felt heavier than the last as he got closer to his destination. The feeling of salvation was sensed when Mateo looked upon the crystal blue water. He bent closer to the edge and stared down at the oasis. Reflections of his band of brothers’ side by side with him.

Mateo fell to his knees.

And once again, a hand was placed on his shoulder. Mateo’s eyes begin to glisten.

“Hey Mat. I know what you are going through. I’m here with you. You are no longer there anymore. You are here. Present. With me.”

Mateo plunged into heavy sobbing. Head tucking into his knees. Under his tears, he spoke.

“They took them away! They’re fucking gone Simon! I didn’t deserve to get a chance! Why me! It should have been me to...” Simon kneeled next to Mateo and wrapped his arms around his head.

“I know. I know. I think about them too. We got each other, Mat. For so long I held it together. I didn’t ask for help. And now being here with you, it made me realize that you also held it in too. They would want us to keep going. Enjoy life. Salute their sacrifices.”

Simon wept with Mateo. Both men wrapped each other in a rocking embrace. Looking upon the lone oasis. The dark figure behind them bowed his head and is soon wisped away by the gusts of wind. The vivid world is blown away into a white flash.

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Mateo opens his eyes to the bright light bulb above the bathroom. Holding him tightly is Simon. Mateo is confused. Asking.

“What happened?”

“I saw you freaking out and moving like you were possessed or something. I tried to hold you down, but you dragged me into the bathroom and hit your head against the mirror. You knocked yourself out and talked somewhat while you were out.”

“But the mirror man that pulled me in... And before, I tried to, I tried to take my own.”

“It’s okay Mat. You are still here. I heard what you were saying and guided you through what you were dealing with. I don’t

know what you saw, but I think it's gone now."

Police sirens crawl toward the household. Neighbors open their front doors to see what all the commotion was about. They feared a resulting tragedy within the walls of the veteran's home.

"Listen Mat, I will help you along the way. Because I need you too. I know we can't forget, but we'll move forward. One step at a time. It won't be easy, but we have each other."

Mateo may never be healed from what happened. But he no longer feels alone. Simon leaves words that will stick with Mateo.

"I will be here for you. Always."