

# REFLECTING GLASS

By: Matt Robbins

God, I'm in this yellow room again...Uhhh that smell...at least I can smoke...at least I can smoke, at least I can smoke. Inhale. Exhale. The walls look jaundiced, sickly and nicotine-stained. These lights, flickering neon, what a fuckin' cliché. They could make a dead man spring into seizure. At least we have the big window looking out onto the night life. Windows should always be this big. Today people hide in their houses and basement rec-rooms watching flat screens and texting their neighbours and boyfriends—escaping the conflict and spontaneity and instead opting for control and security. At least I can look out here. The city truly is candescent with life at night. A completely different animal than 9 am Monday morning, when all the Bay Street business bullies whirl by with their caramel coffees and National Post rags. They have no idea who's up here on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. I don't think they care. I don't know if I can blame them.

It's so stale, can't they open a window. I feel like I haven't had a breath of fresh air in weeks. It's like the smell of air conditioning in a car. I always drove with the window down in the good months. Air doesn't smell the same when it has to go through a middle man before it hits your nostrils. You don't get the exhaust fumes with the AC, but you also don't get dewy fields on a spring morning, or fresh pines in the heat of the summer. Everything in this building smells slightly sour, like fermented milk.

The door opens and I stare at this tall lanky Iranian kid. His eyes bulge like one of those googly-eyed stuffed animals. He looks tired, worn out. He lives between the street, shelters and the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. His family ditched him here when things got weird and culturally unacceptable. I had a friend from China once. She told me they don't have "mentally sick people in China". Yeah sure. Why is it that people think that everyone where they are from is any different from anywhere else? Chinese teenagers have the same D.N.A and brain chemicals that Canadian teenagers have. If we are getting sick one in a dozen then so are they. Thank god for my family. Ohh mom, I'm sorry you got me instead of one of those kids who turn 22, land the big job, get married and buy that nice big boring house. You deserved one of those. It's strange to say in this place, but out of the two of us in this dead yellow room, I'm the lucky one. I've seen pictures of what they do to people like us in China—basically everywhere that hasn't developed a sense of human rights yet—pictures of the marginalized, lying in the street, begging for food when they're lucid enough, or maiming their children as the only option to feed them from the pennies of passersby, or in jail or other heinous institutions, or just ignored long enough until they can't take it and find a razor or a bridge.

"Hey man, you need a smoke again?" I ask the tall thin man...boy...peer.

"Yeah, thanks. You can see a lot from up here eh? This whole wall is a window. It's fucked up being so high. Everyone looks funny. Makes me feel all important-like up here, like a king." The young Iranian boy almost smiles as he looks at the bright lights. But it's not a hopeful smile, just a smile of remembrance. Like thinking about a favourite aunt that died 17 years ago. He remembers when he was one of the "of sound mind" group. His name is Farid and he became

an orphan at 19 when he got dropped off at the doors of this health centre. Since then he has split his time between the 10<sup>th</sup> floor at CAMH and life on the streets and alleys.

Farid says the same thing about the window each time he comes in here. I guess that's his thing and everybody needs a thing.

"Are they shuttin' us down soon?" I ask, not knowing what time it is. Watches seem irrelevant these days. Time is pointless. We are on their schedule. Time for pills, time for dinner, T.V time, bed time, therapy appointment. It's all theirs. To be honest I kinda like being told when to do things right now. I've always been demonstrably independent but now I just don't have the energy to take too much control over my own life. This works....for now.

"Yeah, they already called for pills. I just snuck in here for one last smoke," Farid mumbles quickly before asking the question.

"Your name's Ben right?"

"Yup, Ben Kowalski."

"They diagnose you yet?" I know Farid's just making chat to take his mind off his own mind.

"Yeah, schizophrenia. What about you? What's the magic eight ball saying about you?" I reply softly. I really don't care tonight but I have manners.

"I dunno man, who cares I guess. It's all the same right? I mean how do they know? Who says they're right?"

Farid gets up and leaves quietly with a nod to say thanks. I extinguish my smoke and begin the walk to the nurses' station. There's a small room next to where the nurses organize their work. They keep our pills and fun stuff locked in tight. The door is split so the top half swings open and the nurse stands on the other side to serve us our meds. I take Olanzipine. Or as I have found out, "a minute on my lips and lifetime on the hips," due to the massive weight gain it causes. I heard of a law suit against the company for not disclosing this lovely side affect. Oh well, it's worth it for a good night sleep. I place my order like I'm at a McD's but she already knows, fifteen milligrams please. It's Nurse Robinson tonight. An older Caribbean woman from Trinidad I think. She's fair and doesn't get fazed by much. A short sturdy woman, with noticeably awful teeth, but a warm smile and soft eyes. She is one of those nurses you want around when someone melts down. Some people have that ability to calm another person's soul. They walk in the room and healing begins. Florence Nightingale, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela I'm sure had that affect. At least they seem to in stories or in movies. My grandmother did for sure.

I swallow my little white pills, say goodnight to Nurse Robinson, and begin to make my way back to my room. I actually like going to bed now, it's safe. I peak my head into the T.V room as a soft glow beckons me. I see Michael sitting cross-legged on the sofa.

Mike was a History major who came out to Toronto for grad school. He was smoking a lot of pot then and living the life of a part time beatnik. From what he tells me, his psychosis came on quick. After a brief attempt to intervene his parents gave up and shut him off. They are a wealthy family from the suburbs of Vancouver and I guess they found it easier to say he disappeared than explain to the golf club why Mike cries so much and talks to himself. He's been in and out of this place for the past 2 years. When he's on the outside he's homeless. There are some resources but he refuses to take his meds and to be honest the temporary housing is only temporary. Without family to return to it's pretty tough. So he ends up on the street, people call him vagrant. Drugs, hunger, fear, sickness, and occasionally community and friendship fill his days. Sometimes they find him having a breakdown at a 7 Eleven or in the bathroom of a coffee shop, and the police bring him back. But he's pretty much given up. Most of us make an effort to get dressed in the morning. Maybe brush our teeth and use the toilet. Mike wears diapers and hasn't cut his nails in what must be a year. Yellow finger tips crown his dry scaly hands. His matted sticky beard and dreaded hair give him a somewhat intimidating aura. Too bad because if you spent 30 seconds talking to Mike you'd realize he has neither the inclination nor the capacity to cause anyone harm. No matter what his current mental state. The only one Mike has ever been a threat to, unfortunately, is himself. And he tries, too often for me. That is the hardest part about being in here—living with the hopeless ones. The ones who forgot who they were. But sometimes, in the right moment, Mike will remind you that he was once an intellect, a formidable keen mind who could manipulate language and ideas to suit him. Now he mostly breaks my heart...But maybe, with the right help, maybe, he could start again.

“Hey Mikey, how are ya? Did you get something to eat at snack?”

“Yeah, I ate a bit. Did you know that I neither create nor consume anything? I think that means I don't exist. I haven't bought anything in years. Haven't made anything in almost that long. What am I then? I'm vapour, a fuckin' aberration, a figment of my own imagination. At least I can't be judged either way...You eat?” Mike settles into the sofa.

“Think I might try reading in bed before I sleep. They want me to write poetry. Do they do that shit with you? Art therapy I guess. I dunno, I'll try but I've never even read much poetry. Ginsberg and a few others, maybe stuff when I was a kid. Whatever, maybe it will pass some moments.”

“What makes you so special Ben? Why aren't you fucked up like me? Why you, not me? Why me and not you? Your family visits you don't they? I bet they're nice. Do they bring you cookies and cakes? Tell you they miss you? No one knows I'm here except the people in here. What does that mean? If I cut my wrist today...where would they bury me? Where do they bury people with no money or family and friends? Have you ever wondered that? What happens to the dead when no one ever thought they existed? Is there some field somewhere they put our ashes? That would be nice. I'd like to be next to a willow tree. I always thought they were beautiful. They sort of hang there and sway like an ocean wave in the wind. Rustling softly, waving to me with their shade and soft leaves.”

“I don’t know Mike. I wish I had a good answer for you. But you’re not totally alone. We’re friends aren’t we? Not sure if that matters or means much. But I think we are friends Mike. We’re both in here. Anyway, fuck, you’re not alone is all I’m saying. You’re a survivor man. I look up to you.” Mike shrugs me off and watches the “*reality*” television.

“Do they make this glass in this building one way on purpose? Reflecting their own polished images back at them. Even if the beautiful people out there wanted to see us they couldn’t. They don’t know we’re up here. Is it for their protection or ours? I guess it might shatter their image of our civilized society to see me looking back at them. If they only knew how quickly they could become me. I was just like them. What happened to me Ben...?”

The nurse pops her head in the door. “Bed time guys. We are locking it down.”

I look at Mike, realizing that he is right. The difference between a financial planner and a pan handler is few bad months, maybe some mental illness or addiction, maybe just a bad divorce or crappy parents. But it doesn’t take much.

“I’ll see you in the morning Mike. Meet you in the yellow room. Night.”

I make my way to bed, remembering that I am one of the lucky ones. My brother is coming to see me in the morning.

It’s quiet and dark and I can stare out my window and listen to music. Tom Waits lately, and the Weakerthans. I’m watching the lights on the tower blink in choreographed madness with holiday colours. I play my new game. Favourite senses...

Sound: Eggs frying in butter on a hot skillet.

Smell: A woman’s sweat, damp parts and femininity.

Touch: Cold bed sheets on my legs and feet.

Sight: Orange sunrises across frozen winter fields.

Taste: Soft, warm, doughy white bread with salted butter.

Time to sleep; the pills are making things soft and fuzzy. Maybe tomorrow something will happen. Maybe tomorrow the world will notice us.

THE END