

5 The mirror, I suppose, was at the heart of it. It was full length. He would stand before it naked, and study himself slyly. There was a certain ridiculousness about the human body which he could not accept in himself. He loved to mock the body in the mirror, mock it obliquely like a child who fears adult retaliation.

And then the mirror settled deep in his mind and things became rather ominous.

10 The ape in the mirror got the better of him. But he would retaliate by dressing himself from head to foot. However, the eyes and part of the face ... Those hairy hands and the backs of his hands where those scars ... Monster!

15 He rushed out into the rain the way some people find refuge in tears of self-pity. The whitewashed barrack-like houses squatted gloomily on both sides of the gravel street. Above him the sky's mind was full of black and angry thoughts and would flash suddenly with the brilliance of a childlike insight.

He reached Number 191. Frank answered the door.

Frank's small, sharply angled face hinted at the existence of things tainted but sweet. The boy thought him a fool – and now shouted: 'Margaret! You're wanted.'

Margaret came.

20 She was tall and soft and smelled of the good things of the rain – little fists of budding leaves and the heady scent of an old golden time. But she was delicate, like a taboo which one is reluctant to name. And she was unhappy. She worried about that mirror of his. And she wanted to break it, name it exactly to his face and watch the glass of it splinter away, and his face settle back once more into the gentle lines she had once
25 known.

He could hear the howling of a baby as he kissed her. Once more he wondered how and by what alchemy she had been conceived out of such squalor.

'Margaret! Bring the visitor inside,' her grandmother shouted.

30 'We're just going! It's almost time for it to start, and we'll be late if ...' she shouted back but was interrupted by a knowing jeer: 'Whore!'

They fled into the rain, dodged the barren apple tree which stood in the yard like a symbol, and walked slowly up the gravel street. The rain came down in little liquid rocks which broke on their heads with a gentleness too rapid to be anything other than overpowering. She laughed a laugh that had little sharp teeth in it and it warmed them, this biting intimacy with the rain. Drops of God's water, that's what rain was. Out of its secret came the leaves of a life worth living. But out of it too came the gorgeous images of the mirror which would not be broken.

They had, that summer, gone to swim in the river. The river gods had been generous and she had felt their blessing trembling upon her skin as she surfaced and shook the crystal-clear water from her shining eyes. He too had dived a deep breathtaking dive at the deepest side where the manfish lived. He had – at long last! – broken the surface and emerged sucking in great armfuls of breath, laughing and beating the silver shimmering lattices around him. At the head of the stream, that's where they had, with great violence, fused into one and it was among the petunias so unbearably sweet that they had become afraid and listened to the staring motionless thing which made the rivers flow. The rushing rapids of them had crashed onwards into the Indian Ocean. If only life was like that always and, yes, one did not have to see the reflections of one's own thoughts. If one was rock. A great breaking spray of it sparked by rainbows. But the frost of the mirror chilled everything into the ice of reproachful silences. It made her see herself in him and realise there was nothing on the other side. Only a great mind-bending emptiness, that other side. The worst of deaths. And then work, work'. She worked as a nanny to a Mrs Hendriks who was fat and soft-voiced and suspected her of numerous but vague sins. Sin. Her first sin was with him behind a hedge. She had stared upwards over his shoulder and watched the great slice of moon big and round and gleaming white. She had not wondered what lay behind it all. On that other side. His face, so close to hers, was utterly strange. Incredible. And she wondered what it was in him that was touching her lips. And the tears coldly stung out of her eyes. Burning. He licked them from her cheeks, and the pain of it stained his eyes like a child punishing itself for some short-coming. Was she the punishment for the ape in the mirror?

It was wet and warm, this feeling of the rain.

The train had chugged furiously into the night, flashing its great beam. They had packed their things hurriedly and in the taxi they had watched the burning street-lights which shone brightly like the guardians of an obsessive barrenness. It had been, in the train, crowded and hot and dozy and they had talked endlessly of the soul of the country, how painful and lovely and boring it all was, hurtling on into God's shadow.

The illusion of going somewhere.

That was his childhood, that illusion. But time had rubbed pepper into his eyes and the stinging of it had maddened it out of him. The mirror said it all and in it he knew his kinsman; the ape, lumbering awkwardly into his intimacy. He had looked behind it all and seen the huge emptiness of it. But the depth in the mirror looked more real.

5 More substantial than the discontent gleaming and humming around his head.

Though the thought of what now lay in the ancient graveclothes tormented him, the least it had to say stung him into activity. He had been happy, unbearably happy, as a child. But at the threshold of manhood he had lingered uneasily; reluctant to take that irrevocable step. The ape in the mirror had laughed sarcastically and had danced and
10 trampled it all into at best a doubtful outcome. But he had stood his ground and smiled a tiny diamond smile. Was this all there was to it? This eternal gnawing in the gut. Racking, always, one's brains in the doorway. Remembering sharply the faces but being unable to stick names to them. And when a name stuck he invariably forgot the face it belonged to. What frightened him was he could never recognise his own face –
15 especially after an encounter with the ape in the mirror. And the ape, knowing its power over him, gradually made the encounters more sordid, more unbearable. It left him feeling like a piece of cloth that has been dipped into cold water and then wrung out to dry on the clothesline of a precarious sanity. This happened frequently – until he began to forget things.

20 At first it was a matter of losing a few hours. But he began to miss out whole days. And when he came out of those blank pages it would be without the faintest recollection of where he had been or what he had done – but invariably he would not even know that he had been in a blackout. The first instance he became aware of something going wrong was when he woke out of a deep sleep to find himself still
25 fully dressed and covered all over with soot – from head to toe, soot. And his knees and knuckles were bruised – his right cheek caked with blood. And there was a red bag in the middle of the room and it was full of obscene Christmas cards. At first he could make nothing of it all.

The second time, though equally disturbing, was less painful; he woke up to find that
30 he had painted himself with whitewash and was wearing a European wig. It took him hours to get rid of the paint and for days afterwards he reeked of nothing else. It made him more than uneasy: something was definitely getting out of hand. The ape in the mirror seemed excited; excitable; it seemed to be treasuring a huge but secret joke at his expense. His gloom deepened. He was really worried that though definitely
35 something was going on he could himself feel nothing at all; he was not sick, had never had nightmares, had never had a nervous breakdown. In fact felt new, like new wine, healthy and supremely fit.

And then he woke up to find his room in great disorder, as though a fiend had been let loose in it. The only thing that had not been touched was the mirror. Everything else

had been ripped up, smashed, torn up and flung about. The room reeked of human faeces; there were mounds of it smeared everywhere ... even on the ceiling.

5 He groaned. It took him six days to clean the mess up. And on the seventh he rested. He was sitting in the armchair when there was a knock on the door. Margaret came in. Immediately she crinkled her nose at the smell of the room; it was unmistakable – something tainted yet sweet. An impure honey scent. And there was a hint of wet
10 petunias in it. She asked him what it was; and for the first time he told her lies. Lies. She seemed to divine it in him. She knew it was the mirror talking to her. And she could not stand it. She casually picked up an empty bottle from the little table and flung it. It splintered into a thousand tiny mirrors – but did not break apart. It simply
15 shivered into a thousand minute lenses glinting into her being. And he in the armchair had changed with it; he laughed bitterly. There was a row; their first real argument. And for the first time they swore at each other.

‘You fucking bitch!’

15 ‘Shit!’

‘Up your arse!’

‘Fucking shit!’

And she burst into tears. It had all been so sudden.

20 Now the little rocks of rain crushed faster upon them like a child tugging for attention. The whitewashed houses on either side of the street seemed to have changed, too, to have become slightly menacing. Slightly evil. And the pattering of the rain sounded like the microscopic commotion of six million little people fleeing a national catastrophe.

Shivering at it, their arms tightened about each other.