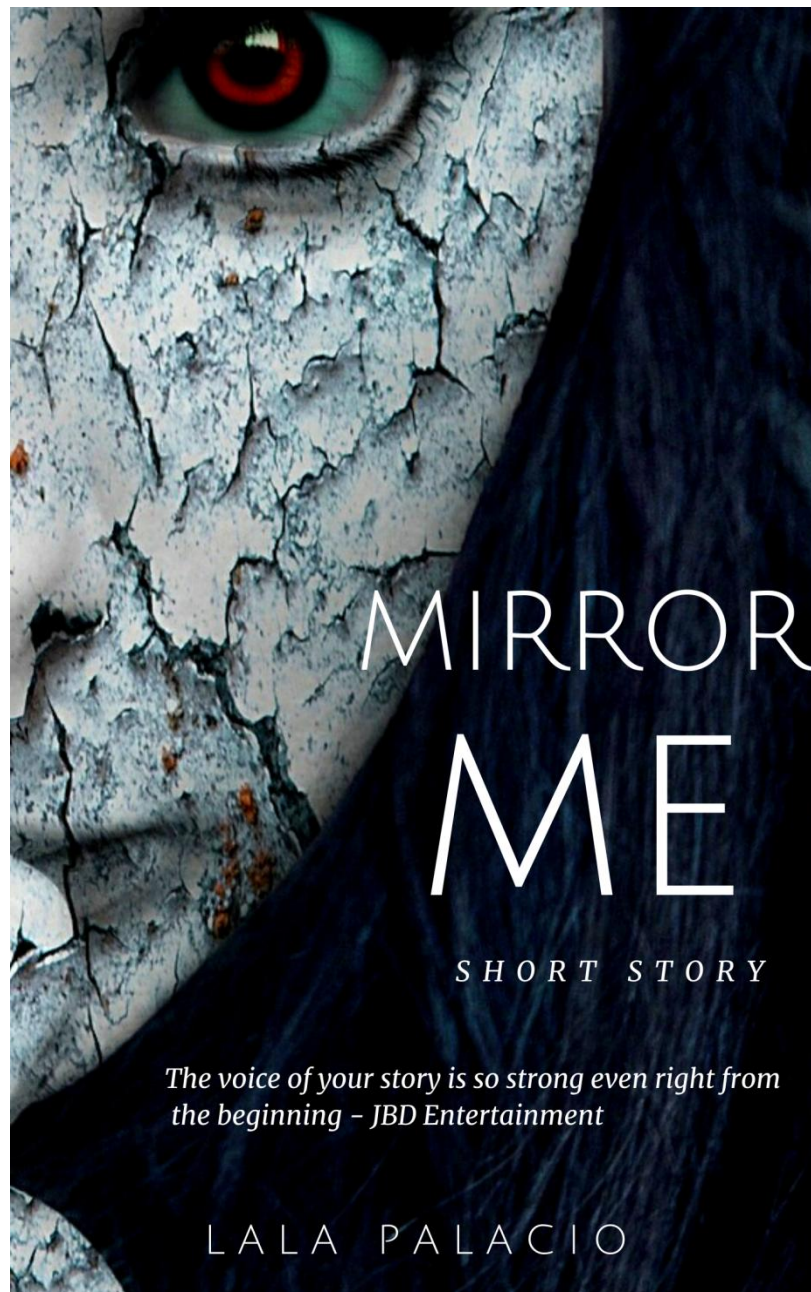


Mirror Me

by Lala Palacio



I fed the monster when I should've starved it. Since I was the only one that could see doppelgangers, no one would believe who'd done the stabbing.

They walked side by side with other people, but I don't think humans could see them. Well, some could, I'm sure. I couldn't be the only one. For the most part, however, they stalked in the stuffy, small city as if handcuffed to their prey by the rarest of keys.

Because of them, my world was too noisy. There was constant murmuring as the stitch-faced monsters whispered in others' ears.

What were they?

In a crowd of about a hundred people, thirty would have the lookalike monsters following their every move, whispering words into their ears that sounded anything but friendly.

I wasn't keen on jumping on any assumptions. For now, I called them the stalkers or, occasionally, doppelgangers.

Plenty materialized next to unsuspecting people. The prey tended to be crying, eerily quiet, or otherwise in blinding distress to cause the stalkers to appear. By the time their grinning doppelganger stepped next to them, coaxing them in what to do next, the individuals would be seething.

The dopples were good at staying. And the longer they stayed, I believed, was when the whispering became talking. For some, everything that came out of their monster's

mouth would be repeated verbatim to whoever they were talking to. My mother was a prime example.

It had been just the two of us when I was younger. We'd make cupcakes on Sundays and she'd let me skip school occasionally so we could walk by the river.

Sometime around when she started dating again, she also started drinking. Now that I was just starting my 20s, the only mother I had was the doppel. Her words were my mom's words. Her actions were my mom's actions.

"If it weren't for that child, you could keep a man," the doppel would say.

"It's all your fault," my mother would say after.

It was alright, though. I had begun working for Mrs. Edan most days after graduation and she didn't have a doppel.

Like old dolls that were falling apart, the stitched monsters sauntered, happily unaware of how hideous they were.

I'd been able to see them since forever. I tried telling my mom about them, but she thought—like most young children—I was making up stories. Now that she was a drunkard, there was no way to say anything to her anyway. School had left me with a negative number of people to be on friendly terms with. Who had I to tell?

When I was younger, before my mother's doppel moved in, I'd be in constant terror of leaving my house in fear they'd maul me.

Normal children got to be afraid of grown men in clown costumes. I wasn't so lucky.

It took a while to realize they posed me no harm, hardly glancing my way. Once, when I was about eight, I approached one that walked next to an old lady. Like most, it looked uncannily like her, exempting the glowing eyes—these were yellow—and cracks and stitches in its crusty, bloodied skin.

“Can you see your invisible friend?” I asked the wrinkled lady.

She stared at me oddly and looked around for some parent to come grab their misbehaving child, but the doppelganger didn't. It winked at me, then placed a finger over its mouth to shush me. “She invited me here,” it said.

The bleakest days were around high school when my mother's doppel completely took over. I hadn't been old enough to have a job then and had run out of clothes that fit. Melinda made sure to point that out when given the chance.

Every morning and afternoon I waved to the stalkers, and on many days, they waved back. I knew they were sinister, as I'd seen them make people do awful things before, but they were the only ones that could like me, just like I was the only one that saw them. In a cautious sense, as a bystander with no need to interfere with wild animals and their prey, I grew to respect them.

That is until the fuzzy-haired boy with kind eyes came along.

“Call me Flynn,” he’d said as he sat next to me in the dimly lit, barf-smelling high school cafeteria.

I’d looked around for gladden, devilish eyes, but saw nothing amiss. It wasn’t a prank.

My tongue was a sponge and my heart a drum. “You must be new,” I said hesitantly.

“It’s obvious?” He looked at his sports t-shirt, probably wondering if most of the city cheered for another team. “Or too forward?”

“No,” I said, breathing returning to normal. “If you weren’t new, you’d know not to sit next to me.”

He rolled his eyes, annoyed with the downer attitude. “Well, you have animal crackers and I don’t.”

I laughed a little too loudly and Melinda noticed from the opposite table and rolled her eyes. I was never certain why she hated me so much. I supposed, the way dopples viewed humans, I was easy prey.

“It’s just—well, everyone here thinks I can see ghosts or something.”

He snatched one of my cookies and raised an amused eyebrow. “Cahn-you?” he asked, cookie between his teeth.

“Nope. I just see assholes everywhere.”

It wasn't a total lie. I'd always choose between who the real monsters were—people, or the stalkers. In the end, whichever I chose, they were both assholes. Secondly, I didn't know if they were ghosts. You had to be dead to be a ghost, right?

But Flynn sat with me every day, even when I didn't have animal crackers. He was open with a smile that could shame the very word allure. On the weekends, he would let me come by his house and try to teach me how to shoot a basket. His mom and sister gave me some old shirts they insisted they didn't wear anymore. We laughed so much, and his friendship and family felt so safe that I began to ponder telling him about the dopples if he stuck around longer.

But he was only my friend for about a month.

"I saw Nasty Nikky wave to a car today. Really. A car. It's like she pretends to see ghosts or something," Melinda's voice rang in my ears.

"Loser is contagious," someone else said. *"I saw Flynn fall face-first at tryouts."*

I supposed Flynn's skin wasn't built for Melinda's comments like mine was with his picket-fence family because one day a second, stitched-faced Flynn joined in.

Flynn was never the same again. Dopple Flynn whispered a lot of things about Melinda, but most were about me. How, if he hadn't been my friend, he wouldn't be so pathetic now and might have even made the football team.

I never spoke to Flynn after hearing that.

While he was nice enough not to say these things out loud, with time, I was convinced, he'd say them whether verbally or not.

I'd stared at the dopple after he whispered something about wishing Flynn had never met me, then at my friend. "Bye, Flynn. I don't think I should come over this weekend. We never really get any homework done anyway."

The image hurt my head and I shook the memory away.

Some people would no longer have their stalker with them one day, but only once had I seen the stalker die before my eyes.

I never heard the man's name, but I remember him perfectly: balding head with tired, blue eyes.

He was at a diner with some woman around his age while I sat alone in the next booth. The stalker had sat beside him, hissing in the quietest whispers. It was trying to shout louder, but it couldn't as if choking on air. The woman sat in front of both of them.

It looked just like the man, save the sheet-white skin, glowing, green eyes, and stitches scattered in seemingly random places around his body. Like a living cadaver version of the man. It put his arms around him in a pleading embrace. It had grown attached, I assumed. And the man's sad, yet relieved eyes let me know that—though he couldn't see the stalker—somehow he had, too, as if he'd had a pleasant dance with death.

I remembered how it died for more than how it shook me.

The embrace—it was *something*. And there I was, sitting at the booth with nothing. No mom. No Flynn. I knew I shouldn't want one: they brought nothing but wicked, petty, trickster trouble.

“I forgive you,” the man said, eyes firmly on the woman with overwhelming sincerity, “for cheating on me.”

And its stitches came loose like spiders flailing in the wind, cracked, porcelain-like mouth falling to its neck. Then it wriggled and yanked as if electrocuted, unable to scream. It's ashy-white skin melted to dust.

The day my monster appeared, I'd been thinking of middle school and how much I'd loved singing back then. Well, up until Melinda told me I sounded like I had a frog in my mouth and should just quit.

She also stole the lead in the play that year.

Now that we were both working the same tedious summer job to save up for college, I'd grown sick of the sound of her humming. It was a poor, hipster boutique. Mrs. Edan made all the dresses herself with little help from us, but I did the most of that little. Normally I'd skip my break to finish cutting out the tags for the dresses just to have Mrs. Edan complain about Melinda's lack of dedication, my fingers left throbbing and numb.

Could that bitch stop it with the humming?

To be fair, she had become more mellow and humble during our last year, but the more time I spent with *mellow* Melinda, the more I wanted to stick the sewing needles in her eyes.

The morning my monster came along, I was letting the light, brown eyeliner dry. It went well with my bespeckled face and matching chestnut hair. I wanted my locks to be longer. Rapunzel length, perhaps. But it hadn't fully grown back after Melinda's bubblegum *accident* sophomore year.

The air was a spicy sort of hot, and since Mrs. Edan's shop didn't have a dress code, I went with something short and pink.

Even on the hottest days, I'd cover up during high school. Truth was; I felt good. And compared to Melinda's bad dye job, I looked good, too.

Was this newfound freedom confidence? I liked to think so, but I couldn't shake the tense feeling the breezy clothes gave me. Was it still confidence if I was just trying to outshine Ms. Bad Dye Job?

The streets were fizzing with life and murmurs that day. I had just enough time to make it to work five minutes earlier than Melinda, which would get me the less demeaning task of working behind the scenes with Mrs. Edan instead of handing out flyers in the heat. While it didn't particularly bother me, something about Melinda stomping to the cutesy,

hand-written “clock-out” or “sign out” station at the end of the day looking like a blotchy disaster gave me bitter-tasting pleasure.

For a moment I thought the plan would be a bust when a crackle of thunder echoed across the sky. I searched for clouds and found nothing, but I was the only one. Had no one else heard it?

Something slammed into me—hard—and I hit the pavement.

I grunted and looked up. “Watch where you’re—”

My drying throat held back the scream and replaced it with vibrating chokes. The thing in front of me smiled kindly, the stitches at the corner of its lips threatening to snap. Her glowing crimson eyes regarded me like an old friend as she held out a hand whiter than mine.

Perhaps it was the fact that both my heart and brain had left my body in those last three seconds, or that the reflection in the window of Danny’s Barber Shop told me my eyes were lying. Looking back on it now, the number one reason I grabbed the monster’s hand was because I *did* know her.

In the window's reflection, bystanders witnessed an invisible force lift the collapsed girl off the sidewalk. An invisible me.

“Hi, Nikolette,” it greeted sweetly.

Having it walk with me to work gave an eerie calmness. Once inside, we spotted Melinda with her unnatural honey-brown hair in a messy ponytail and a long summer dress. She looked harmless. She wasn't.

She saw me, too, and stood from where she was gluing buttons on cards. "Good morning, Nikky! That pink dress is so cute."

"Ignore her," my doppel whispered in my ear repulsively, like a scream shredded down to nothing.

I did, her friendly greeting like a ringing disturbance.

Then, I recalled that day in middle school when I brought cookies to Melinda's birthday party.

"They're from Nasty Nikky. Don't touch them. Ugh, I can't believe my mom invited her."

My doppelganger, now-turned-best-friend, had been with me for a week. I learned that she didn't have a name, and like the sane person I was, I decided to give her one: Nic. It was short for Nikolette, but no one ever called me Nikolette, only Nasty Nikky.

I blinked a few times, reminding myself that name had vanished more than a year ago. Something about having Nic with me brought it back. Even Melinda had stopped using it and, at times, I would smile at her now lively greetings and even greet back.

I still resented her, but we'd been making acquaintance-ish progress. What had happened?

Anyway, the second thing I'd learned about Nic was that she liked to cause trouble. Thankfully, not for me. If anything, she was the twenty-shades-whiter, Joker-faced, red-eyed, invisible twin I always wanted. Nic knew everything about me because she was me, including how to make my day better. Instead of using her invisibility to cause me problems, she would prank Melinda, occasionally getting her into hot water with Mrs. Edan, but mainly with customers.

"Mel, you were supposed to repaint the sign, not the poor man's face...or your hair," I said as she walked in to grab the spare paint can.

Once she was out of ear reach, Nic and I burst out laughing, her laugh more of a chuckle as she strained to keep her stitches in place.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had fun. It wasn't so much Melinda's pain—as hard as it was to admit, I felt a twinge of guilt for acting so mercilessly—but having someone to laugh with. Nic and I rarely argued. The only thing we didn't agree on was how hard to prank Melinda. Her ideas were a bit extreme, but I kept her in check. She'd go off and do things on her own once in a while, but I could handle her.

"Hey, Nikky," Melinda came over to my work station on a damp Tuesday.

I'd shown up earlier and hadn't been stuck in the cloudy outside sauna all day holding the sign, hence why she was a sweaty mess and I a decked out little doll that looked a lot like she used to.

"Yeah-huh?"

"Do you want to grab something to eat after work?" she asked. Her voice...it was almost timid. "I mean, to catch up some."

Nic could talk louder now, and I trusted most everything she said.

"Why would you want to do that?" Nic asked.

"Why would I want to do that?" I asked.

"We've been working so hard on that singing competition," Nic told me. "Why waste time with this wanna-be? After the show, I'm sure you'll make tons of new artsy friends that don't tell you you sound like a frog. A cute boy, even. One with a dopple! One for you and one for me."

"Just to talk," Melinda said.

"I'm busy."

"Tell her about the singing," Nic said. "I want to see her face."

"Busy preparing for the local play," I added icily.

“Really? Me too! We can practice together.” Melinda leaned in closely for her next sentence. The hairs on my arm stood up and, I realized, whether voluntarily or not, she sounded just as snooty as she had in school. “I’m friends with one of the judges and they agreed to give me the role of Jenna—said my voice was perfectly soft.”

I wanted Jenna.

“You know,” Melinda continued. “Whatever part you want, I’m sure I could get it for you.”

I scooted away from her roughly, hands slowly becoming fists. “I guess ass-kissing works in the real world, too,” I said.

Melinda bit her tongue for a moment before she became shy again, fumbling with words as if looking to apologize.

“That should be you,” Nic said, and wrapped her arm around my shoulder. Her hand patted my head and all but shouted in my ear, making it ring. “It’s just like before. End it or stay *Nasty Nick*.”

I felt her grip on me tighten and myself weaken. Melinda finally composed herself and managed to smile. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just—I wanted things to be fair. I didn’t mean for it to come out so rude.”

She was trying. Really trying. Yet, I wasn’t and my Nic was stronger. Who was the real me? Nikolette or Nic? The one that wanted to hurt Melinda or the one who’d become just a tad warmed by the idea of going out to eat with her?

Nic grabbed the scissors. “I can end it.”

My heart thundered and the words both tickled and burned me. That’s when I realized, I fed the monster when I should’ve starved it.

Nic’s red eyes flashed and she dove forward, teeth gleaming. A low ripping sound rumbled as her stitches came loose. The reckless abandon of rage dripped blood that became inseparable from her glowing red glare.

We were supposed to get lunch. I—we couldn’t let Melinda get hurt. But we wanted her to...but I didn’t want her to.

“No!” I shouted as I stepped in front of Melinda.

Nic didn’t stop. Her smile widened as if she’d been expecting this, and she became foggy ash. My one friend...gone. Then, just maybe, I’d gained a new one. A good one.

In the silence, I tasted relief. The unforgiveness and revenge-born monster had failed to achieve its purpose, or so I thought. Melinda screamed upon seeing the blood blossom on my white t-shirt, my hand still on the scissors.

THE END