

MIRROR, MIRROR

By CandaceJay

Mirrors are everywhere: in department stores, schools, offices, and churches. Their purpose is to reflect an image when focused through the eye's lens or a camera. The most popular place to find a mirror is a person's home. Mirrors come in all shapes and sizes and can be used for decoration or personal use. We often find mirrors in bedrooms, hallways, and bathrooms, giving the illusion of space and beauty.

I love mirrors; my house is decorated with them. Yes, there is such a thing as a man who can decorate and likes to ensure he always looks good in a mirror. My mom, Rebecca, used to tell me, "Byron, you stay in the mirror longer than a woman does." I was just fascinated with what I saw in the mirror. It allowed me to adjust to anything imperfect before presenting myself to the world. As a kid, I would play for hours in front of the mirror with my monster trucks and race cars. As Raymond and Rebecca Moore's only child, I would sit in front of the mirror and talk to myself to keep myself company due to the lack of siblings.

As I got older, I found the mirror a place of comfort and freedom—a place where I could express myself freely with no judgments. I made many significant decisions in my life, standing in front of the mirror. On the day my dad and I moved out of the house because my parents were divorcing, I remember seeing my mom's reflection in the mirror with her arm reaching for me as she was kicking and screaming while her sisters held her back. I went for her because I didn't want to leave her.

My dad grabbed my hand and rushed me into the back seat of his red F150 pickup truck, closing the door behind me. When he got in the car and drove off, he looked at me through the

rearview mirror above the dashboard. He said, "Son, wipe those tears and straighten yourself up. That home is no longer safe for a growing boy. Learn to count your losses and move on."

I looked up at the rearview mirror in the truck, adjusted my clothes, wiped the tears from my eyes, and nodded in agreement. Now, I find myself in repeat mode. I am a divorcee like my dad, but instead of having my son Justin with me, he lives with his mom, Nicole. Our marriage ended badly, with me filing for divorce and leaving. Don't get me wrong; Nicole is a wonderful mother to our son, but she never really wanted a husband or friend. She wanted someone she could control with mind games and sex. Hell, if I am honest, I wasn't into the marriage either. I was on the rebound. I was still hurting from the relationship I just got out of with the love of my life. Instead of healing, I met Nicole, got her pregnant, and moved in together within a year. Before I knew it, we were married.

We looked good together, but that was it. Being with her reminded me of when I was a boy, hearing my parents argue and fight. I remember sitting by their closed bedroom door and listening to their disputes.

"You don't love me; you are a liar. Love doesn't force people to do what they don't want," Rebecca said.

"Rebecca, that's not true. You need help because we can't keep living like this," Dad said.

"I am not sick, and I don't want to take these pills anymore. I don't like how they make me feel; I can't be myself when I am on those stupid pills."

"You need them; they help manage your behavior and control your feelings," Dad said.

Fast forward thirty years later, I am sitting in front of my laptop, viewing court documents in my living room, trying to come up with terms of engagement for shared parental responsibilities and parenting time. It shouldn't be like this; I am a good father. Why am I trying to figure out a plan to be active in my child's life? I sat back on my grey leather power sofa and caught a reflection of myself in the wall mirror. I didn't recognize the man in the mirror anymore. The person I saw was a stranger. I didn't see perfection anymore. I saw anguish, distress, fear, and a loser. Moments later, I heard the beeping sound of my alarm system going off and keys jingling.

"Alright, boy, it's time for a treat because you were so good at the vet today." It was my best friend Faith and my dog, Rocky.

Faith yelled out to me, "Byron, you here?"

"Yes, I am in the living room."

Faith is one of my best friends; I've known her for almost half my life. Faith knows me better than I know myself and has always been that voice of reason when needed. When Nicole became aware of Faith's importance to me, she forced me to remove her. Doing that damaged our friendship. I could see that Nicole was jealous of our bond, and as a husband, I felt I needed to put my wife's feelings first. As time went on in that marriage, I realized it was manipulation on Nicole's part. Nicole didn't want any other women in my life that could undermine her control and manipulation over me. After the divorce, I went and found Faith and got my best friend back.

Faith and Rocky entered the living room and joined me on the sofa. I had a whiskey glass of bourbon on the rocks on the coffee table beside my laptop. Faith picked up my glass and took a sip.

"How is it going with your terms of engagement?" She asked.

"I don't know what to say. I want to have the right to make decisions for Justin and to see him whenever I want, without Nicole controlling the When, Where, and How of it all."

"I'm taking it that Nicole is fighting you to the death about it?" Faith responded.

"Yes! It's either her way or the highway."

"Well, shared parental responsibilities and parenting time is the main issue. You need to call her and work it out before tomorrow; remember, a soft response turns away wrath, Byron. Ask Nicole what you can agree on so that Justin can get the best of both worlds from both parents," Faith advised.

I picked up the phone and FaceTimed Nicole. I wasn't trying to see or talk to her before tomorrow's mediation hearing. Talking to Nicole about simple things could turn into an Ali versus Frazier boxing match, but Faith was right; we needed to find common ground for our son's sake. Nicole answered with an attitude already before I could even say hello.

"What?" The coldness of her voice showed on her face.

"Have you come to terms with how we can do shared parental responsibilities and parenting time yet?"

"Have you decided to tell me why we can't get re-married and be a family again?" She asked.

What in the world does that have to do with anything? Why was she changing the subject? At this point, I could feel my blood pressure rising.

"Nicole, would you stop that and focus on the question I asked you."

"I asked you a question first. It seems all you wanted to do was move out, be with other women, and be with your friends. You never wanted me or Justin," she responded rudely.

"That's not true."

"Did you ever love me? Why couldn't you be happy with me?" She cried.

"Nicole, I do love you; you're the mother of my child. Right now, I need you to focus on this agreement so we can be on the same page tomorrow."

Nicole was always good at deflecting in a conversation, but I didn't have time for her games today. I needed her to focus and answer my original question. There was a brief silence between us. I thought she was mellowing so we could come to an agreement, but then Rocky started barking and scratching at the front door.

Faith said softly, "I'm going to take him out while you finish talking." When Nicole heard her voice, all bets were off.

"Who is that? I knew you were sleeping with somebody else. That's the reason why you divorced me, isn't it?"

I screamed from the top of my lungs, "Nicole, that is Faith; she is about to take Rocky for a walk; stop tripping."

"You just can't leave that woman alone, can you? I told you to get rid of her. Does she live there, too?" Nicole screamed back.

From the video, I saw my son Justin coming into their house from outside. He heard my voice and ran to the phone to speak.

"Daddy, Daddy, can we go bike riding again? I had so much fun last time," Justin said with excitement. Nicole snatched the phone from him and looked at me with pure evil.

"Justin, he is never coming to get you again. He has a new family now and doesn't want us anymore." She said with venom in her voice.

Justin was crushed and started to cry. Out of the corner of Nicole's eye, I could tell she was enjoying seeing Justin's heartbroken. I was so upset that I hung up the phone and threw it down. I was putting my shoes on as Faith walked back into the house with Rocky.

"What's wrong, Byron?" She said with concern.

"That's it! I am about to kill her and take my son. Forget mediation. I can't win with Nicole." Faith tried to stop me from grabbing my keys and heading out the door.

"Byron, think sweetie. If you do that, she wins, and you lose. You will go to jail, and joint custody is off the table. Trust me, I am a lawyer; I know what I am talking about."

"I can't be without my son; I love him too much."

"I know, but Justin can't have a father in jail either." Faith pleaded.

I pushed past Faith and stormed out of the house. I jumped in my car and started it up. I adjusted my rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of myself again. Who was that man in the mirror? His eyes were bloodshot red; it was dark back there, and I couldn't see beyond the darkness. To hell with it all. All I want is my son. I need to tell him I love him. I pulled off in my car so hard that I left tire marks in the street. All I heard was the pounding of my heartbeat in my ears. The words that Nicole said kept replaying in my mind like a song on repeat. The more I heard her voice, the tighter I gripped the steering wheel. It was like a dark veil dropped over my eyes, and I fought to see what was before me. When the darkness faded away, I was in the driveway of Nicole's house. I threw the car in park, jumped out, ran to the front door, and rang her doorbell. DING DONG! No answer.

"Where is she? Where is my son?" I said to myself.

DING DONG! There was no answer. My anger was building up inside me so badly that my chest started to burn. I banged on the windows, and still, no one answered.

“WHERE ARE THEY!” I shouted.

A few neighbors started to come out of their homes because of the noise I was making. I jumped back in my car and peeled off. My first thought was to drive up and down the streets looking for them, but that was a bad idea. An angry black man in a predominantly white neighborhood driving wild? Yeah, that would not end well, so I went back home instead.

Unsatisfied that my mission was not accomplished pushed me over the edge. I was filled with rage. When I walked into the house, Faith was gone, and Rocky was locked up in his cage. I plopped down on the couch, kicked my shoes off, turned on the TV, and poured myself some more bourbon. I gulped the first glass down and poured me another. As the glass started to reach my mouth, I glanced over at the wall mirror again, and this time, the person I saw looking back at me wasn't Byron Moore anymore. It was a stranger in my house, and he made himself home. I drank the rest of the bourbon until I was too tipsy to be concerned about my current situation. The next thing I knew, I was out cold.

BUZZ, BUZZ, BUZZ!

My phone's alarm made me jump out of my sleep. I searched for my phone and found it under the coffee table. I grabbed it and turned off the alarm. The time read 7:30, and my mediation hearing was at 9:00. The room was spinning, but I forced myself to get up. I went to the bathroom and jumped in the shower.

Written on the entrance of the courthouse read the words “*House of Justice*.” The courthouse has never been a place of justice for good fathers. From what I've seen, the justice system always seemed to favor mothers more than fathers. I arrived at the mediation room and sat outside, waiting to be called in. My knees were shaking, and my palms were sweating profusely. The halls were so quiet that I could hear a pin drop.

"“Mr. Byron Moore?” I saw this little old lady with a clipboard standing outside the room, calling my name.

"Are you Byron Moore?" She asked.

"Yes-Yes, I am," I replied.

"Please step in the room so we can get started."

Nicole and Justin were already seated when I followed her and entered the room. I sat across the table from Nicole. Justin jumped up, ran over, and climbed in my lap. He gave me the biggest hug ever. That was all I needed. I buried my head in his chest and squeezed him tight. He was everything to me; I couldn't imagine life without him in it.

"I knew you would be here, Daddy! I love you so much," Justin said as he kissed me.

"I love you too, buddy, and never forget that."

Nicole cleared her throat loudly and motioned for Justin to sit beside her. The mediator noticed Nicole's behavior and wrote some notes on her clipboard.

"I'll be back, Daddy; I gotta go sit next to Mommy now," Justin said.

Justin jumped down from my lap and went to sit back down next to Nicole. Nicole looked furious, shooting me nasty looks across the table. The little old lady cleared her throat and started the mediation.

"I've received copies of your terms for shared parental responsibilities and parenting time and studied them thoroughly. The Judge has granted me the authority to rule for the child's best interests. I gather you two don't agree on much when it comes to parenting time. Why is that Mrs. Moore?" the mediator asked.

"Because if quality time is required, then I demand to be present at all times," Nicole explained.

"Do you feel that Byron will harm Justin? She asked.

"No" Nicole said fervent.

"Do you feel that Byron will teach him things you won't approve of?"

"No, Byron is a good dad to Justin." Nicole declared.

"Then, Mrs. Moore, if you know that Byron is a good dad, why does Byron's parenting time need to be done in your presence?" the old lady inquired.

"When it comes to shared parenting time with Justin, I should be around. We made him together, so we should be together," Nicole explained with attitude. Silence came over the room as the old lady wrote down some notes.

"Mrs. Moore, after hearing your answers to my questions, I am deciding that shared parental responsibilities and parenting time will be divided equally. You're divorced, and unless you guys get back together, Mr. Moore has the same rights to Justin as you do." The old lady replied.

The mediator picked up her gavel, slammed it on the table, gathered her things, and left the room. Crushed and irritated, Nicole grabbed Justin's hand, walked towards the door, and looked back at me.

"I guess it's you and Justin this weekend, huh?" Nicole implied.

"Yes, I will be there Friday around six to pick him up."

"You won this round, Byron, but I'm not done with you yet," Nicole assured me as she stormed out of the room.

I put the key into the ignition and looked into the rearview mirror. I smiled and exhaled loudly. A glowing light replaced the darkness that was once there. I could see myself again.

"Welcome back, Mr. Byron Moore," a provocative voice said.

I looked over at the passenger seat and smiled with delight. All was right in the world now. The real me was back; I could see my son when I wanted to, and my true love was right by my side, Faith. She put her hand in mine, and I felt a sense of peace for the first time in a long time.