

Mirror Image: Find Your Better Self

Now accepting nominations for our FALL 2027 Class!

Do you have a friend or family member going through a rough patch? Constantly tired, unmotivated, and angry at the world? Submit them for consideration for our ten-week rehabilitation program!

Students will experience a guided program using our coveted *Mirror Therapy* regimen, which will help them discover the perfect, enhanced self waiting inside them.

Send a letter to MirrorImageGroup@hotmail.com detailing your nominee and any concerns you have by AUGUST 15, 2027, and we will respond with a decision the following week.

Their Better Self is Inside Them, They Just Need to Reach Out and Embrace It.

Dear Mirror Image,

Hello. I hoped it wouldn't have to come to this. I really didn't. But, my daughter, Katherine, my Kate, isn't doing so well. She hasn't been for a long time. She dropped out of college, cut off all her friends, and she's always so damn moody. She won't get a job, won't even try. She just sits in her room. Doing nothing. She always smells of pot and sweat. I am really worried about her. My friend recommended me to you guys. Jessica Avevo, do you remember her? Her kid, Robbie, was in your 2025 class, and she said he completely transformed after the program. Night and day, she said.

I need that for my daughter. I know this letter is short. I don't know how long you want it to be, but I really don't know what else to say. Please, take a chance on her. I know she has it in her—that "better self" you mentioned in the ad. Please.

Sincerely,

Margaret Speculas

"Welcome, all, to the Mirror Image Center for Betterment. We are so happy to have you here and guide you through your journey." A woman with a clean-shaven head beams from her platform high above the crowd. The sun beams just as bright and harsh behind her, creating a blinding halo around her head.

Kate tears at her shredded cuticles, her bloody skin flakes floating to the shiny white tile at her feet. Her eyes dart around the room's high ceilings—from the grim faces around her to the mirrors filling every gap between the large windows and to the tall, lean figure perched above them. She thinks the woman looks like a hawk, almost—a hawk watching over its prey from a

towering evergreen. But the woman also seems like a God to her, untouchable. Pristine. Clean. Kate continues peeling away her cuticles.

“My name is Tesca. I founded this Center a decade ago with the hope of helping lost souls find themselves again. Everyone thought I was crazy,” Tesca lets out a short laugh, her beady eyes scrunching. “Sands, I thought I was crazy. But, then...”

The woman’s eyes slide shut as though she is entering a memory. Kate’s busy fingers still, halfway through a peel. Her breath catches in her throat as she waits for Tesca to continue. The tall man next to her mumbles, gruff. His dirty sneakers kick at the spotless tile.

“Then, we had a breakthrough. I knew, then, that I had to keep this place going. I had to continue building Mirror Image so that all those lost could be found.” Tesca grips her marble podium. “You all will find yourselves here. It will be tough, grueling, even. You might want to quit at times, but I promise you, if you keep going, you—all of you, will succeed.”

Tesca pauses for applause that never comes. Her lips quirk downward for a moment, but she quickly flashes a tight smile. She clasps her hands together, her fingers curling so tight that she risks breaking her own flesh.

“Our Better Selves reside in the Mirror—we must return to the sands from whence we came.”



To the Sands from Whence We Came.

The mantra echoes in Kate’s mind. It repeats in every scripture they gave the students, spoken after every direction from staff, plastered on every doorway, above every mirror. It’s said again now as Yuri, the Mirror Therapy Mentor, introduces their training for the day.

All eleven students sit in a small room filled with sunlight, each at their own vanity. The vanities line the center of the room like desks in a classroom, much to Kate’s disdain. She doesn’t want to remember school. School is how she got like this, so lost. So numb. Her shoulders are hunched as she leans her elbows on the vanity’s cold marble tabletop. Ina, her roommate, sits a vanity away from her.

“Children, look into the mirror.” His smooth voice slithers around the room. “Look into your eyes.”

No one moves. Yuri waits for a beat, his mouth pulling down as if coaxed by a string.

“Look!” He barks. Eleven eyes rise to meet their own in the mirror. His lips curl into a smile. “Good. Just keep looking. Inspecting. What do you see?”

Dark circles. Pale skin. A freshly shaven head, forcibly shaved by a hair clipper her first night at the Center. Small scabbing abrasions where the clippers cut Kate’s scalp when she resisted.

“There is a magnifying mirror attached to the left side of your Mirror. Extend it before you.” Yuri paces down the aisle with his hands clasped behind his back. “Your eye is the portal to your soul. You are waiting inside there.”

Kate stares into the brown oasis before her.

“Do you see Yourself?”

No, just red, angry veins and a dilated pupil.

“Do you see Your Better Self in your iris? Yearning to break free? To join you in this plane?” Yuri stops behind Kate, his too-soft hand clutching her shoulder. “Yearning for *you* to break free? For *you* to join *it* in the Mirror Plane?”

His fingers grip her shoulder tighter as he pushes her closer to the mirror. Kate’s eyelashes are close enough to brush the glass. Yuri leans down next to her ear. “*Listen, Katherine. Do you hear it? The Sands rushing behind the glass?*”

Brown takes up her entire vision. Soft brown with golden rings and green strokes. She doesn’t hear it. Is she supposed to? All she can hear is his slow breath as it hits her ear and the guy at the vanity next to her, Randy, grumbling under his breath. Finally, Yuri steps away, and Kate can finally breathe as he glides over to Randy.

The Guide whispers in his ear, too, gripping his shoulder.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” Randy rears back from the mirror, twisting his body to shove Yuri.

Kate doesn’t look away from her brown oasis, not even when the loud sound of flesh slapping flesh echoes through the small room. Not even as Yuri shouts, grabbing Randy tighter and pushing him flush against the mirror.

Even as Ina screams, Kate never looks away.

Not as her pupil shakes and quivers, as though it’s trying to tear itself in two.



20 October 2027

The Sands.

The Sands are supposed to be in our hands by now. Cradled in our palms as they once cradled us. Sometimes, I feel like I can almost touch them, but I know they’re not there. They keep telling us: Hold the Sands. Accept the Sands.

The other students have mixed feelings about the program. Randy, for sure, doesn’t believe any of this, and he lets us know every chance he gets. Some girl from Jersey believes it with all her heart. What is she seeing that we’re not? Ina hasn’t said much... sometimes she seems into it, other times she looks like she wants to die. I... I don’t know what I believe.

We have to go back into the Portal Room tomorrow morning. I’ll never forget the first time I went in there. I thought I was going insane. The Mirrors all around me—Me all around me. The door’s seam undetectable in the walls. Tesca’s voice echoing from somewhere above, urging me to calm down and let Myself reach out to me through the mirrors. You lose track of time in there. I think I was in there for two hours, but I don’t know for sure. The longer I stood among the mirrors, the more I felt myself slipping away. I was hungry but wanted nothing. I tried to think, but I couldn’t form a single thought. All I could do was look at myself. Me and my

shaved head and white jumpsuit and eyes that gradually started to look different. My body that looked foreign. It wasn't me. It wasn't me. Every time after that, the Portal Room kept getting smaller and smaller. The first time was the size of my bedroom at home. The second, an office. The third, a grocery store bathroom. How many rooms are there? How many times must I face Myself?



Muffled screams seep through the walls of the Portal Room. Ina grasps Kate's hand, their shoulders pressed together. The chamber is even smaller now—they're not supposed to see its size before their turns, but the door opened wide enough while one student entered that they could see in. It can't be bigger than a walk-in closet, and a modest one at that. Francie is inside the Room right now. Kate doesn't know her too well, but she can feel her screams reverberating in her chest. The girl is only thirteen; how is she allowed to endure this? How could her parents allow this?

The eight students left in line watch the door in silence. Jace, the Portal Guide, stands, arms crossed, at his post next to the door. His eyes are unfocused, far off. Kate thinks he must be seeing something they can't. Or, maybe, nothing at all.

Francie's shrieks finally ease away, bringing Jace back from his trance. He pulls the door open, and the young girl sits in a heap in the middle of all the Mirrors. Her shoulders shake as silent sobs wrench themselves out of her small body. The Guide sighs, tapping his white shoe on the tile.

"Come on, Francie. Out." His tapping sneakers punctuate his commands.

The girl whimpers in response. The longer they all stare at her, the more she cries. The putrid smell of piss and sweat gradually wafts out of the chamber. Kate gasps when she finally notices the puddle pooling around Francie, staining her white jumpsuit yellow.

Jace groans. "Really, Francie? Really?" He grits out as he rolls up his sleeves. "You had to go and piss yourself? What do you think your Better Self thinks about that, huh? Would *you* want to get pissed on?"

Francie's sobs find their voice again as Jace yanks her to her feet, her arm trapped in his grip. She hyperventilates as she gets dragged away from the Room and the other students, her audible despair trailing behind as Jace drags her to another staff member to bring her back to the dorms.

Sighing, Jace claps his hands, turning a smile toward Randy, who is next in line. He gestures at the Room. Randy stares, mouth open and eyebrows raised. His fists shake at his sides. The two men watch each other.

"Well," The Guide coaxes. "You're up, Randy."

Randy blinks. Once. Twice. His teeth bite down on his cheeks, making a harsh dimple.

The Guide reaches a hand out, which Randy smacks away, bewilderment broken.

"You're fucking crazy," Randy says at last, taking a step back. "You all fucking are. You, that bitch, Tesca, and every single one of you that believes this delusion even a *little* bit. I'm not going in there."

Jace tuts, stepping closer. “Randy,” he warns. His hand is still outstretched.

“No! You heard me! This is *fucked*. I was putting up with this for my girl back home, but *this*... Francie is a fucking *child*! You guys are insane! I need to leave. I need to call someone. The police, the FBI, I don’t fucking know—somebody!” Randy’s lips curl. “I just know that I can’t be here anymore.”

He shoves Jace away before turning to the remaining seven students in line.

“Guys, come with me or don’t, but you can’t believe a word they say! Especially Tesca, God, she’s batshit. This whole thing is batshit. There’s nothing in the mirror, NOTHING. They’re trying to trick you! It’s all made up! They just want our fucking mone—”

Jace wraps his hands around Randy’s shaved head and forces it down to his knee, a deafening crack echoing in the hallway. Randy yelps as he falls to the ground, clutching his broken nose. Blood mingles with Francie’s dripped urine on the white tile. Kate holds onto a screaming Ina as their Guide leans over the fallen, wailing man, digging into his back pocket for a blade no one knew he had. She can’t look away. Randy chokes on his streaming blood as he notices Jace’s blade. He scrambles and yells, but his frantic hands slip on blood.

The Guide lunges at the man and grips his head, prying his mouth open. Gurgled, manic screams pierce Kate’s ears as Jace yanks Randy’s tongue far out of his mouth and hacks at the organ with the blade. Crimson expels from his mouth as Jace saws through Randy’s tongue, diminishing to mere gushing once the tongue is detached and limp in the Guide’s grasp.

Jace hurls the tongue at the wall, the organ slapping, wet, on the tile in its descent. Randy sobs as Jace yanks him off the ground, blood coating both of them and shoves him into the Portal Room. The door doesn’t make a sound as it shuts.



Ina?

Mmph.

Ina? Are you awake?

Egh... No...

Please.

Fine. Yes, I am.

Can I ask you something?

...

Hello?

Okay.

Do you believe?

...

...

Do you?

I... I don’t know. I might.

Kate.

Ina! I don’t know, I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you.

... No, Kate.

...

No, I fucking don’t. This is insane.

Okay, yeah, it is! But, Ina... I saw something.

You saw something? What the Hell did you see?

In the Portal Room...

When, last month, when Jace cut out Randy’s tongue, or last week when Francie tried to claw her own eyes out?

Sands, Ina—

Sands, really, Kate? Oh, okay. What?

My reflection moved. Tell me what you saw. Because I know I saw jack-shit.

...

For fuck's sake—No, obviously I didn't, Ina.
It—She moved by herself.

Did you happen to also move?

Kate...

I swear! She stepped toward me. I know she did. She held out her hand.

She did!

Ina?



"You all have been so strong," Tesca beams from her podium, looking down at her students. The surviving eight students watch her in silence. Mirror Image sent Francie away after she tried to claw her eyes out—they said her mom picked her up. Two killed themselves in their dorms in November. Now, in December, only the girl from Jersey looks excited to be here. "I know it was tough, but I'm so proud of you for making it to Ascension."

Kate shifts on the bench, craning her head in an attempt to catch Ina's eye from across the aisle. Ina doesn't move. Her eyes remain fixed on a crack in the tile before her. Kate sighs, her fingers gravitating to cuticles that can't be picked anymore.

Tesca claps her hands together. "Before you can Ascend, you must enter the final Portal."

She gestures to a tall box in front of the two rows of students. It stands tall, approximately three feet wide, and six feet high—a standing coffin. Kate swallows.

"I want you to go in there and finally connect with your Better Self. Not just see it, no, *touch it*. Embrace it."

Jersey Girl begs to go first, rushing into the Portal Coffin. A flat-screen TV next to the box shows her inside the chamber from a camera in a corner high above her. She stands perfectly centered in the box, eyes shut and arms still at her sides. Kate thinks she looks like she's dead. She inches further off the bench as she watches Jersey Girl breathe. In, out. Murmuring something.

Sands. Sands.

Tesca's mouth opens to whisper something in her microphone when Jersey Girl suddenly gasps, her eyes flying open. The whites of her eyes are exposed as she stares, wide-eyed, at her reflection, her hands open, palms to the sky, as if holding something. Her lips move rapidly. *SandsSandsSandsSandsSandsSands*. Her right hand slowly presses against the Mirror, her Reflection and her hands touching. Jersey Girl curls her fingers against the Mirror, her eyes sliding shut again.

"She's done it!" Tesca exclaims into the microphone. Her voice fills the room. "Amazing work, Sistine. Welcome!"

Jace and Yuri open the coffin door and guide her away from the Mirrors. Sistine's eyes flutter, her fingers curling and uncurling, all the way back to the dorms. The students murmur from their benches. Kate steals a look at Randy, whose eyes are filled with fury as unintelligible grunts force their way out of his mouth.

With a laugh of what seems like surprise and delight, Tesca says, "Right, who would like to go next?"

Student after student volunteer. Only some Ascend. Most fail, either from quitting or disbelief. Those students are forcibly removed from the chamber and brought through a door—a door that Kate never noticed. Randy's Ascension attempt was the most violent; he started thrashing against the Mirrors, hurling his body at each surface. The box quaked as his body bruised and bloodied. Jace had no mercy as he brought him to the other room.

Randy's blood is still smeared against the glass when it's finally Kate's turn. This chamber is so much quieter than the other Portals she's been in. If she stays still enough, she swears she can hear her heart beating—hear the blood pulsing in her neck.

Eyes shut tight, Kate tries to slow her breathing.

How did she get here?

She gave up. She simply gave up. Kate thought life had nothing good to offer anymore. She thought she had nothing good to offer life. College was worthless, work was worthless, everything was worthless, worthless, worthless.

But here. Here, there might be a chance. She might be worth something here, in the Mirror. If she can reach it.

Eyes still shut, Kate extends a hand to her Reflection. Fingertips touch cold glass. They don't go beyond the glass. She applies pressure against the Mirror, fingertips flush. Still cold. She should have known. Ina was right. Randy was right. They were all right.

Her eyes open to meet her own again. That same brown oasis. Empty.

Kate's hand slides down the glass as she lowers her eyes. Only her ring finger remains on the glass when something warm wraps around its tip, pressing on its nailbed. It lifts her hand back up, the warmth guiding her hand open to rest against it. Five fingers intertwine with hers, and Kate finally looks up again.

She's there. Her.

Her mouth stretches into a smile. Her eyes are Kate's. Her nose is Kate's. Her ears, shoulders, chin. All of it. Yet, She's different. Her cheeks are fuller, like when she was a child. Her skin isn't pale. In fact, it's lightly tanned, like that Summer when Kate went to sleepaway camp for the first time. And, Her eyes.

They're not empty.

Kate grows a smile of her own.

Kate and Kate, smiles to match. Kate grips Her hand back.



Sistine loops her arm through Kate's as Tesca guides them through meandering halls. She giggles in her ear, still talking about their Ascension.

"Can you believe it, Kathy? We did it!" Kate hoists her back up as she stumbles over her feet. "We just reached out and *did it!* Oh, my Sands! I knew it was real! I knew it!"

The girls and the other two Ascendeds slow to a stop as Tesca turns to face them. Sistine's grasp on Kate's hand feels like enough to cut off her circulation. Light streams in through the windows lining the doorframe, blinding Kate. Tesca is a dark silhouette amidst the light. She almost looks monstrous. It might be the sun, but Kate swears the woman is taller. Wider. Limbs bent and misshapen, with lumps and appendages where there weren't before. She blinks, and the mirage disappears. Kate forces a laugh out.

"There is one more step, my children." Tesca's silhouette clasps its hands together. "There's something very important I need you to do inside this room. You will know when you enter. As you stand there, I want you to focus on connecting with your Better Self without the Mirror. It's daunting, but you can do it. I believe in you."

Her figure steps away as the double doors open, the four Ascenders walking, hesitant, into the room. Though Sistine never loosens her grasp, Kate frees herself from her confining arms.

Ina's wide eyes bore holes into Kate's, her hands cuffed behind her, tethered to a steel bar. Her head slowly shakes left and right, her mouth falling open. It's only been a few hours since the Ascension, but Ina looks like she's been held captive for days. Her white jumpsuit is wrinkled with oxidizing blood, with small abrasions scattered across any exposed flesh. Randy and the other two Failures are cuffed to the bar as well. Jace, Yuri, and two other Guides she has never seen are posted at the room's four corners.

Sistine stands tall, her shoulders back and confident, her face eerily calm. Does she know what they're supposed to do? The girl shuts her eyes and breathes. Kate feels as though she might faint. All eyes are on Sistine as she meditates.

Suddenly, her eyes snap open. A shriek expels from her maw as her bones crack, her small frame growing a foot. Her flesh distorts like clay, an arm pushing its way out of her side, stretching its palm open like it was waking from a deep sleep. Dozens of eyes of every color pop up around her body. Sistine groans like a beast as an entire face grows from her left shoulder.

Kate's breathing doesn't calm even when Sistine's transformation ceases. It certainly doesn't calm when Sistine—or, Other Sistine—springs forward, Her sharpened hands plunging into Randy's chest. His large, tongueless mouth opens wide in a mangled scream as she takes hold of him, ripping his heart from his chest. He slumps, yet she keeps shredding.

Is this what perfection is? This monstrosity of the flesh?

Where does their imperfection end and their perfection begin?

Ina screams louder than she's ever heard anyone scream before. Randy's detached eye rolls at the imprisoned girl's feet, blood and gore smearing her already-stained white shoes. Heavy breathing and Ina's sobs fill the room once Sistine stops ravaging. The Guides never flinch. Sistine drops to the ground in Randy's remains, her chest heaving. Her eyes—all of them—are wide and unblinking. Kate's hands shake as she looks at the other Ascenders. She doesn't know them well despite their close proximity these last few months. Yet, she can tell that the man is terrified, while the woman is oddly excited. Is it possible to fail now, even after they made it through Ascension?

She turns back to the Failure Lineup. Ina chokes on her tears and vomit. Kate didn't even notice that she had puked. The girls watch each other as the Ascended Woman connects with Herself and pounces on the girl beside Ina. The Blood of the Lost sprays and coats every surface of the room, every ounce of flesh. They keep watching each other even as the Ascended Man falls to his knees and weeps, screaming that he can't do it, he won't do it, they can't make him do it. Locked eyes never falter as Yuri produces his blade, a similar blade to what Jace used last month to cut out Randy's tongue, and slices his throat.

Kate knows what she is expected of her now. The other Failed Girl lies in a heap on the floor next to Ina, sobbing with her hands raised above her head, still stuck to the bar. Ina watches Kate with tears in her eyes.

Can she do it? Is it worth it?

To kill the only friend she's had in years?

If Kate refuses, she'll die. This would be the end.

If Kate complies, she'll live as a murderer.

She used to want to die. She used to dream of it, cursing when her eyes opened in the morning and begging to never wake up when her eyes shut at night. It would be so easy to give up now.

Yet, something holds her back.

She holds her back. Herself, Kate, Her Better Self.

She knows She's there, waiting. They touched in the Portal, and Kate felt more love flooding through her than she ever felt. She might live as a murderer, but at least she would *live*. Kate would be Better. She could get a job, go back to school, maybe get a cat—a little black cat, like she always wanted.

Life is waiting for her; she just has to reach out and embrace it.

Ina disappears behind the dark of her eyelids. Kate imagines reaching out before herself, palms open to the sky. Sands falling from somewhere above her, gathering in the valleys of her hands. *I'm here. I'm ready.*

I'm ready.

A scream tears through her body—her soul. Kate feels as though she's being torn in two, shredded into tiny pieces, then molded back together again. Eyeballs pop up like pimples across her flesh, arms and legs pierce through her sides and back. She feels a mouth move and stretch its jaws on the center of her back.

Her eyes only open once the pain dissipates. Ina comes back into view, her eyes wide and streaming with tears. She begs and pleads, shaking the steel bar behind her, throwing herself at the ground—anything to get away. But she's trapped.

Kate narrows in on her, stretching muscles old and new. This is the Best she's ever felt. She throws a glance at Jace, who gleams with pride. He nods. Kate shifts her gaze back to Ina. She knows.

"Kate, please." Ina's voice is a quivering whisper. Tears won't stop falling from her pitiful eyes.

It's a shame. It's a damn shame.

She could have been saved, too.

Better Kate grunts, throwing Their shoulders back and bending Their knees. Their massive arms wrap around Ina's screaming form as she leaps, quelling the girl's terror with one yank toward the ceiling. The room falls silent save for labored breathing and the soft squelch of Ina's head as it collapses to the tile.

Not everyone can make it—not everyone can save themselves.

Some are doomed to be lost forever.

To never return to the Sands from Whence We Came.

