

# BY THE MIRROR OF MY YOUTH

By Kathe Koja

One of the most exciting new writers to hit the science fiction scene in some time, Kathe Koja is a frequent contributor to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. She has also sold stories to *Pulphouse*, *Universe*, *The Ultimate Werewolf*, *A Whisper of Blood*, and elsewhere. Her first novel, *The Cipher*, was released to enthusiastic critical response, and a new novel, *Bad Brains*, was greeted with similar acclaim. Her third novel, *Skin*, has just been published. She has had stories in our Sixth, Seventh, and Ninth Annual Collections. Here, with her usual hard-edged élan, she gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "technological obsolescence" . . .

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Raymond's sweat. Just a bead of it, a proud greasy glitter in the Slavic valley of his temple, his left temple mind you, the one pointed at her. Of course it would be. Rachel had passed no day, had in fact lived no moment of her entire adult life without one of Raymond's irritations parading itself before her. It was a gift he had.

He shifted, there on the bench, the preciously faux-Shaker bench he insisted upon inserting in her morning room like a splinter in her living flesh.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked her.

She forbore to answer in words, preferring the quick nod, the quicker rise from her chair, beat him to the door if she could. She couldn't. His healthy rise, his longer reach, his more advantageous proximity to the door, and still he stopped, paused to hold it for her:

"After you," he said.

"Why not," she said. "Once in a lifetime can't hurt."

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Halfway through the long drive, he spoke again, her hands tight and graceful on the wheel: "Those gloves look shabby," he said.

"They *are* shabby."

"Well, why don't you get some new ones?"

“That’s right.” The defroster’s heat blowing back, oven-dry into her face. “That’s you, isn’t it, Ray? When it wears out, get a new one. Because the old one doesn’t work anymore. Because the old one’s *wearing out*.” There were certainly no tears, she had cried this all out years before, but the anger was as bitter and brisk as new snow.

His profile, advantageous in the passing arctic shine of the landscape. His noble brow. “Oh, for God’s sake. Aren’t you ever going to stop feeling sorry for yourself?”

Who else will, she wanted to say, but that was as petty as it sounded and anyway they were there, the low shiny lines of the clinic before them, as cool and precious as mercury in the manicured drifts of the grounds. The circular driveway looked as if it had been literally swept clean. She pulled the Toyota right up to the entrance, as if it were a nice hotel with a nice doorman who would see to it that the car was safely parked. Her hand on the heavy glass door, warm as honey even through her shabby glove, her frozen skin, did they even heat the glass? No discomfort here, she thought—royal-blue carpet, pink marble glint of the receptionist’s desk—heated glass and heated floors, only the client left cold. It made her smile, and she kept the smile to give to the receptionist. There was no point in taking it out on him.

But the receptionist’s smile, heavy lips, bright teeth, was all for Raymond: “Good afternoon, Mr. Pope,” not presuming to offer his hand until Ray offered his, then accepting it in a flurried, flattered grasp, oh God if she had seen it once she had seen it a million times. If he said anything about *Brain Fevre* she would vomit on the spot.

“It’s an honor to have you here,” the receptionist said.

“Thank you,” Raymond said.

“Dr. Christensen is waiting for you. Will you come this way, please?”

Rachel followed, silent, silent in the warm office, thinking not of what was to come or even of their, no, her first visit here, the papers and papers to sign, the needles and the sharp lights, but of a day when Raymond had sat, slumped and sorry before his terminal, the monitor screen bright and crazed with the germinous of what would become *Brain Fevre*, saying, “It isn’t any good. It isn’t *working*.” Fingers restless on the keys, toying with Delete.

“It’s going to.” Her hands, not on his shoulders—they had already got past that—but on the green slope of his swivel chair, unconsciously kneading the leather, the padding beneath like flesh under skin. “Just sweat it out, Ray. You can do that.”

And he, lips skinned back like Benjamin who lay beneath his feet, “What the

hell would you know about it?” and the echo of Benjamin’s mimicking growl. Benjamin had loved Ray like a, like a dog, though of course Rachel had been the one to care for him, fill his dishes and let him in and out and drive him to the vet for the interminable shots that prolonged his painful life, drive him too for the last shot that set him free, that set Raymond breaking casseroles and cups in the kitchen when she came home alone.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” weeping in his rage, and she, still able to be surprised, protesting that she *had* told him, had begged him to come with her, to be with Benjamin at the end, and he had taken her World’s Fair mug, her sister’s mug, and standing poised like Thor before the porcelain sink—

“Mrs. Pope?”

“Oh.” Looking up to see Dr. Christensen, smiling, this smile for her now but she was past needing smiles, at least for today. “Are you ready to go?”

Raymond’s words. “Of course,” she said, making it a point to rise smoothly, showing nothing of the jeering clack of bone on bone, the pain that in its inception had compelled her here, back when such things were not only prohibited but prohibitively expensive, before the ambiguities of the Frawley Act, before she had come to loathe Raymond so professionally it was almost a job. It *was* her job, after all, because after all what else did she have to do, useless keeper of the shrine when the god himself was still alive to tend to the incense and answer the mail, every letter hand-signed by the master in his very own childish scrawl, his—

And a door, opening into the jabber of her panic. Scent like medicine, but not. And her voice, but *not* her voice.

“Hello.” And beyond the fumble of the others, their self-congratulatory greetings, looking to see herself, eighteen and smiling, holding out her hand.

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Carlene. Raymond had named her, of course. She was his toy, after all. She moved around the house like water, her grace so eerie to Rachel from whom it originated, from whom it had so long ago decamped, deserting her at the onset of the disease. In the days when she could still cry, not for herself or the pain, but Raymond. In the days when Raymond still held her, when they talked, talking out this, too, this plan, she whispering, “I don’t care so much about dying, but I can’t stand for you to be alone.” And he, breath hot against her forehead, tears in his voice, “I can’t stand it either,” and together they wept. For him.

Together they signed the papers, got the bank draft, almost everything they had—this was in the days before *Brain Fevre*, before the money that made their original sacrifice ludicrous, Ray had spent almost that much last year on redoing the

Japanese garden. Together they read through the documents, discussed the procedure, experimental, frightening. She drove to the clinic alone, lay in cold paper garments, waiting.

“Did my husband call?”

A meaningless smile. “Perhaps he will later, Mrs. Pope.”

When the cells took hold, when the birth began, it was Raymond they notified, while she lay anxious and drugged not half a hall distant. When she finally arrived home, knees trembling, stomach sore from all the vom-iting, she sagged in the doorway of his studio and slurred out, “It’s a girl.”

It was Raymond’s name on the progress reports, Raymond’s preferences in the client file; he was even listed on the donor sheet, and when she protested this last obliterating irony he had obliterated her further: “Well, let’s be realists, Rachel, who is all this for? You or me? You won’t even be here.”

“Thank God,” she had said, already sorry, sorry unto death, but there was now no chance of erasing the fruit of this creation, this costly exclusive child of her flesh. Of course Raymond had long ago refused her the chance for children, but then again this would be no child: this was the second coming of Rachel, his wife improved. The flesh-toy, Rachel called her, called it, unwilling to admit to personhood this monstrous insult, all the more mon-strous for her own complicity in its conception.

The progress reports continued. The flesh-toy prospered, the years went on, and her disease, like a river, ran through it all; sometimes she thought she was dying, and in the fading instant wondered with pale regret what it would have been like, to see this woman, this cloned pet of hers.

And now, of course, she knew.

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Carlene drank tomato juice. Carlene wore wool. Carlene did crossword puzzles, slightly crooked teeth unconsciously exposed as she frowned over a word like *lepidopterist* or *pantophobia*. Rachel watched her like an anthropol-ogist, thinking, I do none of these things, I never did. And yet Carlene liked loud bass-heavy music, and cut apples in slices, never the wedges that Raymond preferred: “They taste better this way,” she said firmly, and reluctant, Rachel thought Yes. They do.

She was repellent to Rachel, yet irresistible, as consuming as an itch the time spent observing, seeing spread before her the sweet table of her own youth, lived anew each day in the person of a stranger. As Carlene fetched and carried for Raymond, admired his gardens, studied his art, did all the things she had been

created to do, Rachel sat wrapped in the pocket of her pain, and watched.

See the flesh-toy reenact the same old ballet, the same old pavane of his ego and her cheery prostration, his heavy-handed lessons and her student's gravity, his reversionist cant and her wide-eyed worship—it was far worse than Rachel had imagined, far uglier than she could have guessed in the days when she nursed her indignity like a shameful pleasure. But I thought I would be dead, she argued with herself. I thought I wouldn't have to see. Does that make it better? with cold self-disdain, and the eyes that watched Carlene grew dry with a feeling she had not bargained for, that she had imagined in this time of deathbound selfishness beyond her.

She tried to turn away, tried to tell herself it was none of her business, Raymond had certainly made *that* clear. His toy, his money. His sin. Not mine, but: Raymond's hand on Carlene's shoulder, not possessive but de-vouring, who better than Rachel to know at last what a simple eating machine he was, she who had been his feast for so long. She wanted to go to Carlene and say, Get out of here. Run for your life. But she had read the contract, so many times it was memorized. There was simply no option for Carlene.

Carlene stayed out of her way those first few months, always genuinely pleasant when they met, in the hall, in the kitchen, but also seeming to engineer those meetings deliberately, to keep them brief and few. Carlene had had her own treatment, there at the clinic, her own lessons to learn. Only Raymond had had no treatment. Only Raymond was allowed that largesse.

But finally Rachel tired of it, finally cornered Carlene in the bathroom of all places, stopped her as she left: one hand on the doorjamb, the other cool and useless at her side. The pain was a brisk thing today; it made her blunt.

“I want to talk to you.”

“All right.” No smile but no discomfort either, leading the way into the morning room: had I, Rachel thought, been so commanding, so very young? And the answer was no, of course, this was less her than that first aimless swirl of cells; the physical duplication was flawless, but the mind behind was Carlene's own.

Now the time to talk, and the words embarrassed her with their inherent idiocy, How does it feel? What do you think about it? Carlene, that grave pucker she recalled from mirrors, that frown that meant I'm listening. “Carlene.” Rachel's voice kept even. “What does this mean to you?”

“What?”

Rachel shook her head, impatient, waved a finger back and forth. “This, all of this.”

And with her own impatience, “That’s like asking a baby what it thinks of sex. It got me here, didn’t it?”

Rachel laughed, surprised, and Carlene smiled. “I read the contract,” she said. “I have a place to stay. Nobody said I had to like anything.” Rising up, all in black today with Rachel’s own brilliance in that color, and without thinking Rachel put one hand on Carlene’s arm, remembering the stretch and easy pull of muscles all unconscious of a time when such motion would be less memory than joke, and said, “Has Raymond tried to sleep with you yet?”

“Yet,” Carlene said, and snickered. And gone.

Yes. Well. What had she expected?—as the morning room turned cold, as the sun turned away—it was the virtual owning of a human being, Carlene’s brick-wall acceptance notwithstanding, worse than slavery even if she smiled, even if inside she screamed with laughter every time Ray’s prick saluted. You bought her, too, her mind reminded, cold calendar. Not your money, but worse. Your blood. Your *pity*. For Ray.

“*Shit*,” she snarled, and heard from the kitchen Raymond’s tee-hee-hee.

For God’s sake, why couldn’t he even laugh like a human being? And Carlene’s agreeable chuckle, had I sounded that way, too? No. No. Because I didn’t know, did I, that I was a servant, less than a servant, I thought I was a partner, I thought it was a partnership. Till death do us part.

And the old self-contempt rising up like a cobra from a basket, swaying to the music of memories, why couldn’t she be one of the ones whose mind went first, lying dribbling and serene instead of twisting like a bug on a pin, on a spike, *God*, and the pain came then, like a no-nonsense jailer, to take her all the way down.

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“This isn’t necessary.” Raymond in the doorway, not so much frowning as issuing displeasure like a silent cloud of flatulence, metronomic glance mov-ing back and forth, Carlene and Rachel, Rachel and Carlene. “She has a day nurse on call.”

“I don’t mind,” Carlene said. Apple juice pouring into a clear glass, such a pretty color. Rachel tried to smile as she took the glass, happy spite, drink it down. Ha ha, Ray. I’ve got your toy.

“She has these episodes, on and off. She’s going to keep having them, till, till they stop.” Staring at them both, faintly bug-eyed, what do you see, Ray? Side by side like some horrible living time-lapse photograph; what did it do to Carlene, to see *her*?

Finally he gave up and went away. Carlene reached at once for the apple juice, as if she knew how much effort it cost to drink it. "I'll stay for a while," she said.

"This," Rachel's mutter, "shouldn't be legal. *Shouldn't.*"

Carlene's shrug. "Neither should marriage."

The episode, yes, Raymond, sanitize the pain and the puking, why not, it doesn't happen to you. The episode passed. Carlene's illness-born habit of spending mornings with Rachel did not.

They never did much. They never talked much. Sometimes they went outside, took a walk to the main road and back. Sometimes they looked at books, Rachel's art books, relegated by Raymond's loud scorn—Patronizing saint of the reversionist movement, nothing matters unless it's backwards and talk about life imitating art—to the bookshelves in her room: Carlene agreed with her about Bosch. Carlene agreed with her about a lot of things.

Side by side in the morning room, slow lemon light and the thin fizz of soda water in her glass, Carlene's profile like talking to herself, her young self, oh God had anyone ever had such a chance? Her life beginning anew without Raymond's tyrannical insistence on his genius and her incomprehensible acquiescence to same, she could not live it all again, had no desire to, was in the end too fatally tired. But. The new improved version. What she couldn't do.

Hearing above them Raymond's petty bluster, eternal petulance at being again excluded from their morning tête-à-tête; "How can you stay?" Rachel asked her, and Carlene's exquisite shrug: "Why did you?"

Exquisite, too, the tang of shared bitterness: "It was in my contract, too."

"Yours was a hell of a lot easier to break."

Rachel, brittle and slow, back a torment in the wicker chair, seeing her own blind chains snaking like living things to encircle these young wrists, choke out a second life; no. Very very quiet: "We'll see."

Carlene's frown. "We won't see. If I violate the terms of the contract, I can't get a job, I can't rent an apartment, or get credit—I can't even get a social security card. I'm an *appliance*, remember?"

"No," and even Carlene drew back now, from the venom in that word, the shaping of it like poison in the cage of withered lips, was she frightened that one day she would look that way, too? That's what we can't let happen, little girl. Not again. "Once," Rachel said, "was enough."

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Time was the object. They had little of it, either of them, but they were industrious, they could squeeze everything from a moment. Carlene was decoy, pleasantly demure in the presence of attorneys, her daughterly affection touching the strangers who watched her helping her afflicted mother from office to office, my goodness isn't there a family resemblance! "It's not that we want to *break* the contract, no," Rachel's cool headshake, Carlene's youthful gravity, "we only want to modify some of the circumstances. You know I think the world of Carlene, I think of her as my daughter," and Carlene's smile on cue, perfectly on cue.

It was her job, too, to keep Raymond busily oblivious in the times and moments when his attention would have been worse than nuisance. Some-times Rachel watched them, phone to her ear, murmuring questions and asides and slow cool ponderings, no hint of ticking desperation in the attempts to cut the path she needed, gazing through the bedroom window: their walks in the Japanese garden, Raymond's tee-hee-hee audible even from this distance, and she smiled like an adder, even the trebling pain a spur; I'm running away, Ray, you goddamned son of a bitch, you vampire. Finally running away.

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"It's not going to work," Carlene's midnight bitterness, face in hands, Rachel lying newly pinned and tubed on the bed. "You said yourself that if there were any new loopholes in the Frawley Act, these guys could find them." More bitterly still: "But there aren't."

Who would imagine that mere breathing could hurt so much, just breath-ing? "We can find another way."

"I can't wait for another way. I can't *stand* him, Rachel."

"Neither can I. Carlene, I'm doing my best. Believe me," looking at that face, that future, "we're going to find a way."

But: Episode after episode, dreary daily tragedy of a soap opera, what time she had, left lucid, was in doubt, what time at all. Raymond refused to come near her room, he said it smelled, in fact he said the smell was all over the house. He wanted her put in a nursing home. He was making some telephone calls of his own. Carlene said.

"I keep calling them back," she said. "I tell them I'm you."

"We're coming so close," Rachel said. Today the pain was thumbscrew, corkscrew, through every joint and muscle, walking through her brain, new owner.



The doctors—Raymond insisted she know—were quietly shocked she had lasted this long, even with treatments, even with drugs just this side of experimental. “I think if we had more time, if—”

“Shhh.” Carlene’s hand on her shoulder. “Don’t talk, I know it hurts you to talk.” Looking up, to see Carlene’s tears.

“I didn’t *want* it to be you.” Crying now and that hurt, too, immeasurably but not as much as the knowledge that without her it could never have been done, without the final monstrosity of her consent, of the bits of her body given over in the same heedless headlong way she had given everything, everything to Raymond. We were stupid, in those days, she wanted to say, though nothing could finally excuse her, nothing could explain and maybe it was really only she who had been so stupid, who had not only made Raymond her life but had made another life, identical to hers, to make his as well. Crime and punishment there before her. With tears on her face.

I tried to fix it, Rachel thought, you know I did, tried, too, to tell Carlene that, but found in her lungs the brutal ache of airlessness, in her eyes the delicate swim of motes as dark as the claiming of that which ate her, now and finally, alive.

Her head on Carlene’s breast, when Raymond found them. Her eyes, as open as Carlene’s, as wide, as if both were left astonished in the ancient wake of the bridegroom, come to take the elder daughter to the dance.

“It was going to happen no matter what,” he said, heavy with the grief at having to participate in something as sorry as a memorial service. Everyone who came, he was sure, came for his comfort. “It’s not genetic, though. I had the doctors make sure. There’s nothing for you to worry about.” Silence. The slip and tug of her hair through his fingers. “Her, her half, she wanted it to go to you. And all the prenuptial things.” More silence. “It’s come to a fair amount. She was good with money. I don’t bother with the lawyers, you know, but they tell me it’s legally yours. Through me, of course.”

Carlene’s tiny nod, not seen but felt. “I’d rather not talk about it,” she said.

“I understand.” More arthritic stroking, tangling her hair so it hurt. “When I’m, when—someday, you know, I can’t leave it to you, you’re not in a position to receive property, but I’ll take care of you. I will take care of you.”

And the slow time-bomb tick of his heart, her face pillowed on the flat rise and fall of his sour old man’s chest, “Mmm-hmm,” the ghost of her silent grin in the dark. “Mmm-hmm.”

There are all kinds of contracts, when there is money enough—she had more than you think, Raymond, more than you knew about—contracts you don’t need to

be legal to sign, contracts that are in themselves illegal. Rachel knew about those kinds of contracts, but they frightened her. We'll do it the right way, she said, we'll take the time. Rachel was so patient.

But I couldn't wait for her. And I won't wait for you, either, Ray.

Because I'm not patient.

Because I'm not Rachel.