

# Altered images

A glance in the mirror offers reassurance, self-affirmation, constructive criticism. But Ariel Leve wanted to try a brave experiment: to live totally mirror-free. She reflects on her challenge

At the Anthropologie store in New York on 16<sup>th</sup> and Fifth, all the mirrors in the dressing room are slanted in such a way that no matter what you try on, you look like Kate Moss. The mirrors are so flattering, women warn each other before shopping there. It's a goodwill gesture to point out the "magic mirror" effect to an unsuspecting shopper before she risks financial ruin. Of course, it helps that the lighting in there would flatter a troll. But it really comes down to the mirrors; in the event of a blackout, I suspect women would choose to camp out in those dressing rooms.

Whenever I need a pick-me-up, I'll go to this store and buy something I don't need and will never wear again. Why would this lift my spirits? Because standing in front of those mirrors for five minutes does more for my self-esteem than a year's worth of therapy.

I once asked the saleswoman whether, instead of purchasing clothes, I could purchase the mirror. That didn't go down well. It was like asking a chef for the secret ingredient in his special sauce.

I admit that my self-confidence is intrinsically connected to a visual image. Not just how I see myself, but how others see me as well. And often the latter is more powerful. There will be times I am walking down the street feeling unattractive and invisible when an affirming glance from a stranger will change my entire mood. Alternatively, I may leave the house thinking I look like a movie star, but all it takes is one comment about my dark circles to wipe those positive feelings off the map. Once you hear the word "tired", it's a long road back to "glamorous".

I have never thought of myself as a vain person. I tend to look in the mirror for reassurance – to confirm that I don't look as bad as I think I look or if I do, at least I know. Unless I've just had a fabulous haircut,



I don't look forward to viewing myself. It's a necessary evil.

The mirror is often my harshest critic and very rarely my friend. It is a classic co-dependant relationship: it damages my self-esteem, but on the few occasions it makes me feel better, all the previous anguish it has caused is forgiven. But what if there were no mirrors? How would I feel then? What would it be like to live for a week without looking in a mirror at all? I decided to find out.

## DAY ONE

I have covered all the mirrors in my apartment. I wake up, go to the sink to brush my teeth, and stare at a white towel. Surprisingly, this is more enjoyable than I thought. Most mornings, I am examining my face for signs that something has gone wrong overnight. My first question is of the day is: what's got worse? Is the rosacea redder? Have any new spots appeared? Is that line everyone lies about not being noticeable – more noticeable? But this morning, there is nothing to obsess about. I

decide I prefer living without a mirror and that this week will be a relief. Then again, I've been "off-mirror" for all of 10 minutes.

Because I work at home, I do not have to think about getting dressed. But I have agreed to go out this evening to a book launch for an ex-boyfriend and by noon, having been off-mirror for a few hours, I begin to rethink that plan. Getting dressed without a mirror? And no make-up? It causes me to focus on the real issue, which is: why do I still care so much about what the ex thinks? Looking good conveys I'm doing well. But then it hits me. I don't need to convey doing well – I *am* doing well! With or without lipstick. I need to remember that.

My friend Joanna will join me. I discover that, when living without a mirror, friends become significantly more important. "How does this look?" I ask, after insisting she come up to my flat before we leave. Her response ("Good") does not suffice. Her judgement is crucial. After all, if I am to use her to size up >

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my appearance, she has to be more specific.

I am wearing black jeans, black boots, a black jacket and a white T-shirt. My hair is pulled back because I can't leave with it loose: no mirror plus 90 per cent humidity equals permanent ponytail. As for make-up, I attempt to apply black eyeliner using the back of a spoon. I can't see myself, but it simulates a reflection well enough for me to locate my eyelid. As soon as Joanna begins coaching me I decide it's more trouble than it's worth. I abandon the eyeliner and my eyes feel naked. I apply lip-gloss feeling as though I'm six.

Leaving the house without checking my reflection full-length isn't easy. I'm attached to it, more as a ritual than anything else. Seeing my image, having an exterior view, is a security mechanism. Without it, I'm forced to rely on inner strength. And my friend's word. Neither of which make me feel particularly secure.

Once we arrive at the party, before I can enter the room, I make a beeline for the loo. I resist a long look in the mirror even though this is what I would normally do. I realize how often my moments of reflection take place in front of my reflection. So instead, I sit on the edge of the bathtub and gather my thoughts.

This is what it must feel like to go cold turkey. I need a "hit" before I can go in. It's made me irritable. In the lift on the way up there was a woman powdering her nose with a Chanel compact. I glared at her as though she was Osama Bin Laden.

Insecurities have shifted. Instead of wondering how I look, I'm now wondering what I have to say. I enter the party with a mandate to be extra-charming and act as though I feel pretty.

## DAY TWO

The struggle has set in. I miss seeing my face. I miss the rest of me... Not so much. Living alone, I am the first person I see every day and even though it doesn't thrill me, there is now a void. I decide to tape a photo of myself that I like on top of the white towel. Every time I need to look in the mirror, I look at this photo and it helps. Having a visual is the point; it doesn't have to be "live".

It is the weekend and the day is spent avoiding reflections. I am careful not to glance at shop windows, to look down when entering a public restroom, to sit with my back to the wall at the café, to not speak or make eye contact with the taxi driver in his rear-view mirror. Mirrors are everywhere. I never noticed this before. Maybe because I was too busy looking in them.

Over lunch, my friend mentions that I have a piece of spinach between my teeth and a new form of semaphore is created to help guide it

out. Not having not seen it myself, I feel less embarrassed. There are often times when, after viewing myself in the mirror, I will suffer an indignity in retrospect. For instance, noticing that my hair looked a mess. But this isn't an option now. How I feel about myself in the moment is all that matters.

## DAY THREE

I've been wearing the same clothes for three days. The black jeans, white T-shirt combo has become a uniform. It's allowed me not to have to spend time thinking about what to wear, not to have to worry about how it looks, and it's freed me up to think about other things. It's been said that Einstein wore the same clothes every day for this precise reason. Only instead of contemplating the theory of relativity, I'm contemplating the giant spot on my chin.

Spontaneously, I decide to buy a new pair of jeans. I've been putting this off for a while because it's stressful. Perhaps not having a mirror will take the pressure off.

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It does. Trying on jeans without a mirror is liberating. The saleswoman is pushing a pair that I do not feel at all comfortable in. Even though she assures me they complement my figure, I feel like a house. I am often swayed by these women, convinced they can see me in a way I can't see myself. But this time, a new strategy emerges: trusting my instincts. I leave the store empty-handed but edified in the knowledge that skinny jeans only work for me if there's a skinny mirror to view them in.

A threshold has been crossed. The urge to cheat is no longer as strong. The previous night I was holding up a glass of water, like Narcissus, straining to see my reflection in it. But today, the urge has subsided. Not having seen a mirror has, all of sudden, become soothing. I've spent less time thinking about physical concerns and more time focused on goals and ambitions. I've become less obsessive about things, too. For instance, I know the spot is there, but being unable to check on its development, it's become less bothersome.

Not having a mirror has had a calming effect. I am not missing it.

## DAY FOUR

I am travelling to London. It's a test. Packing is an ordeal. What clothes do I know I feel good in without viewing them in front of the mirror

first? Not many. For the first time ever, I am flying transatlantic with just a carry-on bag.

On the plane, my face feels dry and I'm convinced if I look in the mirror I'll see a parched-earth landscape. The TV screen on the back of the seat is front of me is a dangerous temptation. I've placed my scarf over it, but it keeps slipping off. There is an attractive man across the aisle who smiles at me. I wonder if he is smiling out of sympathy because I look so horrendous.

Going through immigration, the officer who stamps my passport looks down at my photo, then up, then down again. I have an urge to tell him about this assignment and that it's been four days since I've looked in a mirror. But I hold back and remind myself I'll never see him again. I hope.

Exiting Heathrow, I am grateful not to have a boyfriend. I can't imagine him meeting me right now.

## DAY FIVE

I have adapted well. There is a sheet over the mirror in the hotel bathroom and today is another challenge. I will be getting my hair cut. When I tell people I'm having this done without a mirror, the reaction is one of awe and disbelief. Several people have said, "You're so brave". You'd think I was going to Iraq.

At Headmasters in Mayfair, creative director Zoe Irwin leads me to a private room where the mirrors have all been covered up at my request. She draws a picture of the cut. As she talks me through it, I can tell this is harder for her than it is for me. She is used to working with and talking to a client through the mirror – standing behind the chair, using eye contact. She takes an inch and a half off. Maybe it's her affable manner, or maybe it's that I'm now relying on other ways of feeling good about myself, but oddly, I am not nervous at all and leave the salon feeling as though I have just had the most fabulous haircut of my life.

## DAY SIX

I decide to look. I have to. I am too curious about my hair. Before I look, though, I pause. It's as if I'm about to go on a blind date and see someone I've only spoken to on the phone. I'm tentative because I've benefited from not feeling enslaved to my image. I pull the towel down, and staring back at me is a face that I recognize and feel relieved to see again. It must be the haircut: it's made everything look more appealing. Not having seen myself, I can appreciate what I do have as opposed to searching for what's wrong. So it was a good week. It included acts of bravery (a haircut), defiance (shopping for jeans) and interior exploration. I saw less of myself than ever, and found more. ■