

Could you go mirrorless?

At the risk of unknowingly having spinach stuck in her teeth, writer Lynn Ermann dared to go reflectionless for seven days and nights. Could you? Would you?

**F**OR MORE THAN HALF my life, I have carried on a close, if tempestuous, relationship with my reflection. She has told me to fix my hair as we window-shopped, to wipe lipstick off my teeth as we dined, to choose beige over burgundy as we endlessly mixed and matched. Once, on a camping trip in the middle of the Adirondack Mountains, she appeared in a warped canteen just to inform me of a burgeoning blemish on my chin. Who else is this attentive to my appearance? Certainly not the sort of guy I date, who tells me I look "fine" and "good," who doesn't notice the little things, like the way one thigh bulges out a tad more than the other.

Unfortunately, my intimacy with that woman in the looking glass also goes by another, not-so-pretty name: vanity. And I'm not at all proud of it, or of the insecurity that underlies it. I don't even think this constant checking makes me feel better about my appearance; I think it makes me feel worse. The more I look, the more distorted my sense of what I see becomes, until I am just parts: a pimple, a thigh, a broken blood vessel, a mass of frizzy hair.

My self-prescribed cure? I won't look at my reflection for seven days, during which time I must participate in all my usual activities—and more. The week will culminate with the ultimate test of willpower: a blind date. (Who will suffer more, me or him?)

The Saturday night before my no-mirror experiment begins, I reflection-proof my home with the meticulous assistance of friends, covering every remotely shiny surface with colored tissue paper, cocktail napkins and packing tape. Struggling to fall asleep that night, I wonder, How desperate will I become this week? (At least I won't have to see my under-eye bags.) Will any poppy seeds stuck in my teeth on day one still be there on day seven? Will I have to wear knee pads to my flamenco class? Will I show up in the middle of the night at my friend Melissa's door in tears, begging to know if I still exist?

THE GLAMOUR

# Could You Live Without A Mirror For One Week?

## Day One

Where am I? No mirror, no me

**Stumbling into the bathroom** on Sunday morning, I'm startled at first to find three yellow cocktail napkins where my face should be. I pass another, larger yellow square on the way out to feed the cat, then one aquamarine square and a long fuchsia rectangle, color blocks that together give my apartment a cheery downtown-gallery vibe.

In the shower, I have a revelation: When it comes to my appearance, ignorance actually could be bliss! Standing under the running water, I suddenly realize I haven't felt this free since I was a kid living with my no-fuss single father, who didn't even own a full-length mirror. His guy philosophy: Get dressed once. Don't look back.

I do get dressed once—jeans and a sweater, easy—and stay that way. I'm actually relieved that I can't do my usual procedure of arranging two mirrors so that I have front and back views.

My appearance obsession is cured—sort of.

As I'm about to leave my apartment, I think, What if I have a zit? It's the first fear to insinuate itself into my new Eden. The second: What if I look pale and pasty? And finally: What if I run into my ex-



# You, you, you!

Emotional Issues

boyfriend? Soon I'm back in the bathroom again, this time with makeup in hand.

With blind faith—literally—I smudge on some cover-up and a dark-bronze cream eyeshadow. I bought the shadow the week before because I thought cream would be easier for me to apply blindly (a little cheat), but I forgot to test-drive it. Am I getting both eyes evenly? What if my blusher application is so much darker on one side of my face that I resemble the half-seared witnesses to the alien spaceship in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*?

"Seep wearing makeup," suggests a friend who doesn't need any. Ha. I decide to do my best with the makeup, then act as if I think I look fine. If I walk around the city staring nervously at the ground, I'll only attract more attention.

Sunday afternoon, a man in a truck hoots at me: "Hey, gorgeous!" I'm in love.

## Day Two

Help! Mirrors, mirrors everywhere

The whole damn world is reflective.

When I leave my apartment, I have to back out the door because there are mirrors by the elevator. I think I have pressed the down button behind me, but when I back into the elevator it takes me four flights up.

On the way to my exercise class, shiny shop windows appear right and left, and shiny cars with shiny windows cruise by. Even the puddles conspire, tempting me to break my no-vanity vow. Instead, I charge down the street, looking straight ahead.

As a freelance writer, I don't have to worry about office mates seeing me during the day, so it's mostly strangers who observe my odd new habits. In the women's bathroom at the library on Monday afternoon, I apply lipstick facing a (matte) tiled wall, while the three women facing the mirror glance back at me in confusion. When I accidentally catch a blurred image of myself in the chrome fixture on the hand dryer, I spin around quickly, then find myself facing the mirror. I gasp in horror and bury my face in my hands, sending the women running for the exit—and smearing my lipstick across my chin (I think).

## Day Three

Just another face in the crowd

I am starting to worry that I have something in my teeth. I floss twice in the morning

and even stash extra floss in my purse. I avoid poppy seeds, spinach and parsley.

Since I can't look at my complete outfits, I focus on what I *can* see: my feet and hands. My fingernails suddenly appear unbearably bedraggled, so much so that I splurge on a deluxe manicure. I change my shoes compulsively (a foot fetishist in the making). I also discover "shadow-styling." If I look at my shadow, I can at least tell whether my curly hair has dried in a relatively ruly formation.

Tuesday evening, my appearance paranoia hits a high point: As I wait for a subway downtown, it's so hot on the platform that my cover-up feels as if it's cracking, melting or doing something I don't want to imagine. I look around. I think a man just moved away from me....

As I exit the station, it starts to drizzle, an absolute disaster for someone with my curly-frizzy hair. *I will not care*, I decide, and I don't. I arrive at my friend's house, skip the usual bathroom appearance check and concentrate instead on...my friend.

## Day Four

Dancer in the dark: the flamenco kid

Every Wednesday night, I take a beginners class in flamenco, a Spanish dance that

involves complex hand gestures and rapid stomping. I got into dancing a year and a half ago—first swing, then tango, now this. But I'm finding flamenco to be the most difficult by far, even with a mirror.

Without one, I feel like a buffoon in a slapstick-comedy routine. For one thing, I am standing way in the back, in the only part of the room where I won't inadvertently catch a glimpse of my reflection.

I also can't quite make out the teacher's hand motions—kind of kooky with flamenco—so instead I stare intently at the woman in front of me.

Midway through the class, I start to relax and listen attentively to the music and the teacher's directions, focusing only on my own arms, watching my fingers twist through the motions, my bracelets jangling. I feel totally centered. Each arm is a graceful, disembodied instrument. *Yes. I am a flamenco dancer. Odd?*

"Girl with the bracelets!" shouts the teacher, waking me from my dancing-queen reverie. "The *other* left arm!"

Coordination aside, I do feel more connected to my body now that I can't actually see it. Whether running or dancing, I'm focused on the way it moves, not just the way it fills out a pair of jeans. ➔

## Day Five

If only I could see what you see

Thursday afternoon, I go to see my downtown artist friend, Alexis, who has generously offered to paint a portrait of me. "It will be the only image of yourself that you see all week," she says. So I will be what I appear to be to her. How existentialist!

"Is this idealized?" I ask her, gazing like Narcissus at the finished portrait. My eyes are much larger than I recall, my mouth is fuller and my coif is suspiciously perfect.

"It's how I see you," she says. A friend doesn't paint you with spinach in your teeth!

Before we leave for lunch, Alexis offers to watch me apply makeup the way I've been wearing it all week. I smear on the bronze eye shadow and look up expectantly.

She grimaces: "Oh, no—half, take off about half!" Great. Either that hooting guy was really being sarcastic, or Grandma was right—it's all about how you carry yourself.

## Day Six

Look at me now! Liberated at last

Avoiding mirrors is now second nature to me. Without a thought, I avert my eyes from every window, enter every bathroom staring at the floor, and leave my apartment backward each morning (no neighbor run-ins as of yet, thankfully). I'm feeling so confident that even the thought of my impending blind date can't rattle me.

## Day Seven

The blind meeting the blind (date)

Ha. I spend most of Saturday afternoon frenetically changing outfits and trying to see them in my shadow, only my apartment windows are at all the wrong angles—I can't get a really good shadow going. Finally, in desperation, I run to my friend David's house five blocks away. "You look good," he says, guylike. I'm not sure I believe him, but it's all I want to hear right now anyway.

The first mishap of the blind date is entirely my fault: I muddle the directions and arrive late, probably red-faced and sweaty, likely having rubbed off most of my makeup and smeared the rest when I wiped my face with a napkin I grabbed from a fruit stand—but who knows?

My date, Liam, is blond and cute, and mildly amused by my rather harried entrance. But we soon ease into a relaxed evening at a swank restaurant. Without the option of checking my reflection (I'm determined to make it through the last day!), I can focus only on what is in front of me: Liam. He is charming, and we (almost spookily, he says later) have a lot in common. He mentions he's been looking into swing-dancing lessons. I nerdily quote my favorite movie, *Laurence of Arabia*, which turns out to be his favorite, too. We're also different enough (I'm an only child, Liam's one of 12!) to make it interesting.

The next day, he sends me an e-mail: "Can I see you again?"

Only when I can see myself!

## Reflections

Mirror, mirror, back on the wall

Taking a deep breath on Monday morning, I pull the yellow napkins off the bathroom mirror in one swift motion. I'm still here! I'm also inexplicably glowing, healthy and exuding serenity, as if I've just returned from a week at a spa. Go figure.

## READERS' ADDICTIONS REVEALED

# I Couldn't Survive a Week Without...

"I couldn't survive five minutes without Chap Stick. I'm a total addict. I guess it's really more out of habit than because of actual dry lips. I keep a tube in every purse and in the pocket of every jacket. I have one next to my bed, in my kitchen drawer, in my desk drawer, and I never go out the door—even for a run—without it!"

—CINDY, 30, BERNARDSVILLE, N.J.

"Call me a geek, but I couldn't possibly survive a week (or even a day) without doing *The New York Times* crossword puzzle. I have done it virtually every day for the last 15 years, and my mind feels kind of restless if I skip it. I even try to get the *International Herald Tribune* when I'm on vacation because they reprint the puzzle."

—MARTHA, 33, NEW YORK CITY

"I would say sex, but if that were true I would have died a long time ago!"

—MEGHAN, 25, BOSTON

"I couldn't survive a week without TV. It's sad, but I'm totally obsessed with so many shows, especially *Ally McBeal* and *Dawson's Creek*. If I have to miss them, I'll send e-mails to all my friends begging someone to tape them for me. I know I have an addiction, and I'm willing to admit it."

—CAROLINE, 25, ORLANDO, FLA.

"I love Finesse conditioner and couldn't possibly go a day without it. I've been using the stuff since I was 13. A lot of people tell me they can smell me in the elevator long after I've left—because of the Finesse scent. I'm going camping later this month, and the only non-outdoorsy gear I'm bringing is...you guessed it!"

—ELAINE, 28, SEATTLE



"I couldn't survive a week, let alone a day, without talking to my mother. She's my best friend, and I rely on her help with everything from dating to hosting dinner parties. I have to touch base with her for the day to feel complete."

—SHERRY, 26, CHICAGO

—ERIN ZAMMETT

I have to admit that I'm pretty happy to see myself. Plus, I missed trying on clothing and makeup (and I've gotten a little sick of shoes). I just don't want to let myself become as obsessive as I was before this experiment. It's one thing to be sure my makeup and clothing look basically presentable before I leave the house, but it's quite another to keep on checking ad infinitum. I realize that all those peeks I used to sneak had me convinced that a little smudged makeup or an outfit that's a bit unflattering could be a disaster. If I tear my looks apart at the tender age of 29, I can only imagine how I'll handle the inevitable appearance of lines, gray hairs and extra pounds as I grow older. My reflection is the sum of my parts—but I am much more than that.

I take down half the mirrors in the house, then set new ground rules. Only two mirror checks a day from now on—one when getting dressed in the morning or evening and one more during the day. As with any healthy relationship, I don't need to be with my reflection all the time.