

Through the One-Way Mirror

Margaret Atwood

1 **T**HE NOSES OF A GREAT many Canadians resemble Porky Pig's.
 This comes from spending so much time pressing them against
 the longest undefended one-way mirror in the world. The
 Canadians looking through this mirror behave the way people on the
 hidden side of such mirrors usually do: they observe, analyze, ponder,
 snoop and wonder what all the activity on the other side means in
 decipherable human terms.

2 The Americans, bless their innocent little hearts, are rarely aware that
 they are even being watched, much less by the Canadians. They just go
 on doing body language, playing in the sandbox of the world, bashing
 one another on the head and planning how to blow things up, same as
 always. If they think about Canada at all, it's only when things get a bit
 snowy or the water goes off or the Canadians start fussing over some
 piddly detail, such as fish. Then they regard them as unpatriotic; for
 Americans don't really see Canadians as foreigners, not like the
 Mexicans, unless they do something weird like speak French or beat the
 New York Yankees at baseball. Really, think the Americans, the
 Canadians are just like us, or would be if they could.

3 Or we could switch metaphors and call the border the longest
 undefended backyard fence in the world. The Canadians are the folks in
 the neat little bungalow, with the tidy little garden and the duck pond.
 The Americans are the other folks, the ones in the sprawly mansion with
 the bad-taste statues on the lawn. There's a perpetual party, or
 something, going on there—loud music, raucous laughter, smoke
 billowing from the barbecue. Beer bottles and Coke cans land among
 the peonies. The Canadians have their own beer bottles and barbecue
 smoke, but they tend to overlook it. Your own mess is always more
 forgivable than the mess someone else makes on your patio.

4 The Canadians can't exactly call the police—they suspect that the
 Americans are the police—and part of their distress, which seems

permanent, comes from their uncertainty as to whether or not they've
 been invited. Sometimes they do drop by next door, and find it exciting
 but scary. Sometimes the Americans drop by their house and find it
 clean. This worries the Canadians. They worry a lot. Maybe those
 Americans want to buy up their duck pond, with all the money they
 seem to have, and turn it into a cesspool or a water-skiing emporium.

5 It also worries them that the Americans don't seem to know who the
 Canadians are, or even where, exactly, they are. Sometimes the
 Americans call Canada their backyard, sometimes their front yard, both
 of which imply ownership. Sometimes they say they are the Mounties
 and the Canadians are Rose Marie. (All these things have, in fact, been
 said by American politicians.) Then they accuse the Canadians of being
 paranoid and having an identity crisis. Heck, there is no call for the
 Canadians to fret about their identity, because everyone knows they're
 Americans, really. If the Canadians disagree with that, they're told not to
 be so insecure.

6 One of the problems is that Canadians and Americans are educated
 backward from one another. The Canadians—except for the Québécois,
 one keeps saying—are taught about the rest of the world first and
 Canada second. The Americans are taught about the United States first,
 and maybe later about other places, if they're of strategic importance.
 The Vietnam War draft dodgers got more culture shock in Canada than
 they did in Sweden. It's not the clothing that is different, it's those
 mental noises.

7 Of course, none of this holds true when you get close enough, where
 concepts like "Americans" and "Canadians" dissolve and people are just
 people, or anyway some of them are, the ones you happen to approve of.
 I, for instance, have never met any Americans I didn't like, but I only get
 to meet the nice ones. That's what the businessmen think too, though
 they have other individuals in mind. But big-scale national mythologies
 have a way of showing up in things like foreign policy, and at events like
 international writers' congresses, where the Canadians often find they
 have more to talk about with the Australians, the West Indians, the New
 Zealanders and even the once-loathed snooty Brits, now declining into
 humanity with the dissolution of the empire, than they do with the
 impenetrable and mysterious Yanks.

8 But only sometimes. Because surely the Canadians understand the Yanks.
 Shoot, don't they see Yank movies, read Yank mags, bobble around to
 Yank music and watch Yank telly, as well as their own, when there is any?

9 Sometimes the Canadians think it's their job to interpret the Yanks to the rest of the world; explain them, sort of. This is an illusion: they don't understand the Yanks as much as they think they do, and it isn't their job.

10 But, as we say up here among God's frozen people, when Washington catches a cold, Ottawa sneezes. Some Canadians even refer to their capital city as Washington North and wonder why we're paying those guys in Ottawa when a telephone order service would be cheaper. Canadians make jokes about the relationship with Washington which the Americans in their thin-skinned, bunion-toed way, construe as anti-American (they tend to see any nonworshipful comment coming from that grey, protoplasmic fuzz outside their borders as anti-American). They are no more anti-American than the jokes Canadians make about the weather: it's there, it's big, it's hard to influence, and it affects your life.

11 Of course, in any conflict with the Dreaded Menace, whatever it might be, the Canadians would line up with the Yanks, probably, if they thought it was a real menace, or if the Yanks twisted their arms or other bodily parts enough or threatened a "scorched-earth policy" (another real quote). Note the qualifiers. The Canadian idea of a menace is not the same as the U.S. one. Canada, for instance, never broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba, and it was quick to recognize China. Contemplating the U.S.–Soviet growling match, Canadians are apt to recall a line from Blake: "They became what they beheld." Certainly both superpowers suffer from the imperial diseases once so noteworthy among the Romans, the British and the French: arrogance and myopia. But the bodily-parts threat is real enough, and accounts for the observable wimpiness and flunkiness of some Ottawa politicians. Nobody, except at welcoming-committee time, pretends this is an equal relationship.

12 Americans don't have Porky Pig noses. Instead they have Mr. Magoo eyes, with which they see the rest of the world. That would not be a problem if the United States were not so powerful. But it is, so it is.
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Hollywood vs. Canada

Elizabeth Renzetti

1 THE MAN NEARBY AT the rally last December wore a T-shirt showing a maple leaf, dimpled with bullet holes, in the crosshairs of a gun. I didn't tell him he had the hair and forearms of a hockey player. In fact, I didn't open my mouth, lest I say *out* or *about*—and mark myself as the enemy.

2 In Los Angeles, thanks to "runaway" productions—American films shot north of the border—Canadians are considered thieves, stealing movie-industry jobs that belong in Hollywood. Last week, the trade newspaper *Variety* turned up the heat with a front-page story about jobs lost to Canada, estimating that runaway productions cost America US\$1.2-billion and 22,400 jobs over the last three years.

3 Hence protests like that one. Hence the guy one over from Mr. Bullet Hole, hoisting a sign that read, "Canada Unfair."

4 *That* burned. Unfair? Canada? Summon the ghost of Lester Pearson—this man needed a lesson in the essentials of our national character. Such as, "I'm sorry, you stepped on my foot." Or, "You can't laugh at me, I'm laughing at me already."

5 At least that's what's printed as truth in the gospel of cultural stereotypes, where it says Canadians are fair, learned, ironic. Americans are ... not. These received notions are convenient, and, as far as I can tell, useless. Living in America for two years has overturned my best-loved prejudices. For one, Canadians are, in some small way, villains. We steal American jobs and blow terrorists back their way. For another, Americans are nicer than us. More polite. More courtly. Bigger-hearted.

6 You don't believe me? Once I, too, wouldn't have believed Americans were anything but brash, potato-brained gun-toters. Within my smug Toronto cocoon, I subscribed to the casual anti-American sentiment around me. (My American-born friend Katherine, who's been biting her tongue around Canadian colleagues for more than 30 years, says, "You can't be an American living in Canada and have a thin skin.")