

# MIRROR MERE



Marie O'Regan

'A stormy, feral and darkly beautiful  
tale by a powerful new writer.'

Conrad Williams - author of *London Revenant* and *Game*

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The mirror was a present for their seventh wedding anniversary. It was perfect, exactly the right thing. After several months of renovation, the last part of the house to be done was the downstairs hall, and Sue had decided the finishing touch was a mirror. She just couldn't find the right one. They'd been searching for weeks and found nothing.

Well, that wasn't quite true. Mike had seen any number of mirrors he thought would look just fine, but Sue would not be persuaded. He hadn't complained, though. He just trailed after her, waiting for her to either find the right mirror or give up, and move onto something else.

Then, about a month before their anniversary, Mike saw it. He had come across a little antique shop called Lilith's on one of his lunchtime walks, and the mirror was right there in the window. The interior seemed every bit as run down as the street outside. No one was in evidence and the place looked more than just empty. It looked abandoned. There was a fine patina of dust over everything, as if no one had been near the shop in months, or even years. He went to the counter and pressed the bell, embarrassed at the loud noise it made in the empty shop. He felt as if he were in church - the air seemed charged, and a little expectant.

"Can I help you?"

The voice was as dry and dusty as the shop, and Mike jumped. He turned round shamefaced, a sheepish grin on his face. The grin died as soon as he set eyes on the gorgon in front of him. The woman was small, of an indeterminate age - although if he had to guess he would have put her at somewhere in her late fifties - and formidable. She looked like a schoolteacher, one who liked to see children squirm, and her eyes were like flint. Obviously tired of waiting for Mike to pull himself together, she repeated the words, and this time her tone spoke volumes.

"I *said*, can I help you?"

"Please. There's a mirror, in the window. I was wondering how much it was?"

She smiled, an expression apparently alien to her normally. All of a sudden he felt like a lamb staring down a wolf, and told himself not to be so

stupid.

"Wait here, sir, while I get it. You can take a closer look."

"Uh, the price?"

"Don't worry, sir. I'm sure we can come to some arrangement." She disappeared into the depths of the shop, and Mike shivered. He felt as if someone had walked over his grave.

She brought the mirror out, and it was perfect. At least he hoped it was. It was obviously quite old, but someone had loved it. It was in perfect condition, and the glass seemed to drink in the light, the reflection crystalline in its purity. He could see his face, looking pleased with himself, the shop looking less dingy than he knew it was, and something ... Somehow, he found himself back out on the street, blinking in the sunlight, the mirror in his arms. He couldn't remember paying for it, or even how much it had cost – just the tinkle of the bell as the door shut behind him.

When he got home, he hid the mirror behind the sofa in his study, carefully wrapped in an old blanket. He was pretty sure Sue wouldn't find it there. He liked to clean the study himself, so that none of his papers got disturbed, and Sue was happy with the arrangement. It was her aerobics night, so Mike settled down on the sofa with the evening paper. He was actually beginning to nod off when she walked through the door with the obligatory Tuesday night takeaway. This time it was Macdonald's, and he tucked in with relish, washing it down with a cold beer. He was almost finished when he noticed that Sue was only picking at her quarterpounder. She looked pale and tired, her hair hanging limply round her face – and miserable, not something he was used to seeing from a fervent optimist. Her cheerful nature was one of the things that had attracted him to her in the first place.

"What's the matter, love?"

"Sorry?"

"What's the matter? You're not your usual chirpy self." She blinked in surprise, and smiled wearily. - "It's nothing, really. I'm just being silly."

"Why?"

"Our normal instructor was off; appendicitis, or something. Anyway,

when the replacement instructor bounded in, we all felt ten years older on the spot.”

“Bounded?”

“Bounded. Just like a great big puppy. If she was over twenty I’ll eat your cooking for a whole week and not complain once.” He raised a disbelieving eyebrow and Sue had the good grace to laugh. “All right, so I’d complain. She said she just wanted to put us through a light work-out so that she could see how we shaped up.” He tried to smother a grin and failed miserably. “Yes, you’ve guessed it. She went so fast and did so much that it was all most of us could do to avoid a double hernia. By the end of the class we were on the floor in a heap, and she wasn’t even sweating!” The tone of indignation was just too much, and he burst out laughing. She looked at him reproachfully for a moment, then joined in.

When the laughter quietened down, Sue sat in silence, a pensive expression on her face. Reaching over, he pulled her onto the sofa beside him. “Don’t worry. I think there’s life in the old bones yet.” They lay comfortably entwined, and spent the rest of the evening reminiscing. After a while, she fell asleep in his arms. He stayed there, holding her close, happy just to be near her, to smell her hair – a smell that had been one of his favourite things ever since he had known her. It evoked memories of hotel rooms and roaring log fires; of long walks in the park, arm in arm. They’d had some happy times. And, God willing, there’d be many more.

Over the next couple of days, Mike became more and more nervous. He tried to reassure himself that if she didn’t like it, they could just go and get something else; but that didn’t help. On the morning of their anniversary, Mike was up at the crack of dawn to hang the mirror before Sue rose. As he pulled the blanket off, he nearly dropped it – just for a moment nothing had been reflected at all. It had looked like a hole, no, a *mouth*, waiting to suck him in. Then the light hit it, and the glass seemed to glow, reflecting everything as brightly as it had the first time he saw it. He hung it without further incident, and fixed a huge adhesive bow to one corner, together with a note, and then he went into the living room to wait.

He wasn’t disappointed. At about seven he heard Sue’s footsteps pad

across the bedroom floor above. The door creaked open, and he heard her walking down the stairs. Then nothing. Just as he was beginning to think she either hadn't noticed it, or hated it, she burst into the living room and hurled herself into his arms.

"Sue?" Something muffled came from the area of his chest. "I take it you like it, then?"

She nodded. "It's perfect. Where on earth did you find it?"

"Little antiques place near work, called Lilith's." He smoothed her hair back from her face. "You look like you did when I asked you to marry me." She stroked his face, her eyes bright, then disentangled herself from him and went to the cupboard under the bay window. Opening the door, she took out a small gift-wrapped box and hesitantly handed it to him.

"I hope you like it. I wasn't sure what to get. I think yours is better, though."

He looked at her for a moment, trying to gauge her expression. Then, solemnly, he took it from her and gently unwrapped it. Inside was an old-fashioned fob watch, gold-plated. It was engraved: 'To Mike, the keeper of my heart.' He looked at her, overwhelmed, and Sue tried to lighten the moment.

"Corny, eh? I think they must have little elves that do the engraving, there's no way a person could write that small."

"It's beautiful. I don't know what to say." She hugged him tight, and rested her head on his shoulder.

"I remember how upset you were when you lost the fob watch your grandfather left you."

Mike said nothing, he couldn't. He was amazed she even remembered. They had only just started going out together when his grandfather died. An only child with parents who travelled a lot, he'd spent a lot of time with his grandparents, and had been especially close to his grandfather. One of his prize possessions had been his fob watch, left to him by his father, and he had left it in turn to Mike, but it had been stolen in a burglary not long afterward. Mike had been devastated. Embarrassed, he cleared his throat and grinned. "Of course, I did get you one other present."

"You did?"

His answering grin was, he thought, entirely innocent. Sue, however, could read him like a book, and a wry grin spread across her face. She stood with arms folded, and waited for the punch line.

"It's in the bedroom."

"Oh, yes?"

"Under your pillow." She laughed, and his heart leapt at the sight of her.

"Race you." Then she was off, running up the stairs, laughing. He followed at a more leisurely pace, and by the time he reached the bedroom she was already dressed in it. An ivory lace wisp of a nightgown, and my God, she looked stunning. She watched him, waiting for his reaction; not wanting to spoil the mood. He cleared his throat. "I've only got one thing to say."

"What's that?"

Smiling, he walked towards her, pushing the door shut behind him. "Thank God it's a Saturday."

It was four o'clock when Mike opened his eyes again. They had spent the best part of the day in bed, and he was pleasantly exhausted. They had only left the bedroom for trips to the bathroom, or to bring back food or drink – and it had been the best day they'd had for ages. One of the best ever, Mike thought. He turned to face Sue, sleeping curled into a little ball, and hated the thought of waking her. Still, it was more than time, so he shook her shoulder, gently; and once again swept a stray lock of hair away from her eyes.

"Come on, then. Get dressed. We'll be late."

She looked at him blankly, trying to wake herself up. She was still far away, lost in whatever dream she had been having. Then what he had been saying connected, and her eyes widened.

"Late for what?"

"Late for dinner. I've made reservations at that new Italian place. Eight o'clock.

"Did you say Italian?" Her face lit up, and he grinned as she leapt out of bed. She had said to him once that a good Italian meal ran a very close second

to good sex. Although he had nearly busted a gut laughing, he had always felt a little uncomfortable at the thought that he might be competing with a lasagne verde and a bottle of house white.

He lay in bed, daydreaming; vaguely aware that it was going to take Sue ages to get ready. At some stage he must have drifted off to sleep again.

It was nearly six o'clock when Sue shook him awake. "Come on, sleepyhead. We'll be late."

Mike shambled to the bathroom for a shower and a shave. It took him all of twenty minutes, and he cursed as he nicked his throat with the razor. He dabbed at it with a flannel, and inspected the damage in the mirror. Not too bad. A movement over his shoulder made him turn around, just in time to see the dressing gown on the back of the door swaying, as if someone had just left the room.

"Sue?" No answer.

As he made his way back into the bedroom Sue was putting the finishing touches to her make up; she didn't even notice him come in - the door swaying must have been caused by a draught. He dressed quickly, knowing time was moving on, and was fastening his tie as Sue's arms crept around his waist.

"Mm. You smell nice."

"Why thank you, ma'am. So do you." He turned to face her, kissed her gently. "Come on, we'll be late if we don't get a move on."

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. All he remembered afterwards was a lot of laughter, a lot of wine and, after a particularly passionate romp between the sheets, this anniversary being declared the best ever. He drifted off to sleep, Sue wrapped in his arms, content with his world and everything in it.

He woke up the next morning to the sound of Sue singing in the shower, something she was not exactly accustomed to doing, thank God. While there were a lot of things he loved about Sue, her singing voice wasn't one of them. She appeared in the bedroom a moment later, all sunshine and dimples.

"Good morning, lover. And how are we feeling today?"

Mike groaned loudly. "You're a cruel woman, Susan Masters." He threw a pillow at her, and collapsed back onto the bed. "Bring me tea, wench. And bacon. And eggs."

"I see. Feel like lord of the manor, now, do we?"

"If you wish to avail yourself of the lord of the manor, please feel free to go and find him. Just bring me some tea, first." She grinned shamelessly at him, and departed, almost skipping, leaving Mike to suffer the trials of a terminal hangover in peace. It wasn't fair, he thought. She had matched him drink for drink, and look at her. Glowing with good health and cheerfulness.

Bitch.

As she passed the mirror in the hall, something reflected in the corner caught her eye, just for a moment. When she looked back, it was gone. Thoughtful, she went and stood in front of it, but there was nothing there now apart from her own reflection. Smiling slightly to herself, she cast her mind back to the events of the previous evening. Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice the glass in front of her swirling with mist. In her mind, she thought the visions forming before her eyes were memories, nothing more. But in the mirror, sweat soaked bodies writhed and intertwined in a replay of their love making the night before.

Shaking herself, she continued on her way into the kitchen. The glass was now back to normal, with no trace of the images it had so recently contained. She had no idea why she felt so uneasy. By the time she put the kettle on, even that had gone. When she brought Mike's tea up to him a few minutes later, she was happy once more.

The rest of the day passed quietly enough. Mike watched the football on TV while Sue busied herself cooking an enormous Sunday roast. The smells drifting in from the kitchen lulled him, and he dozed off, content.

Sue was in the middle of making an apple pie when she heard laughter, followed by a soft cry. Curious, she walked slowly into the hall. Whatever Mike was watching, it certainly wasn't the sort of sport he usually favoured. Peeping in through the living room door, she saw he was asleep and smiled. At least he'd wake up hungry. As she passed the mirror she felt a rush of

warm air playing around her neck, and she stopped, looking into the glass. Her hair was moving, as if in a breeze, and she could still feel the warmth, like little kisses. She closed her eyes and put her head back, enjoying the sensation. The warmth spread down to her chest and now she could feel pressure. If she had looked in the mirror at that point, she would have seen her top buttons being undone by an unseen hand. Warm pressure cupped her breast, and she moaned. She could hear hot, quick little breaths - could even feel them against her neck and chest. Images of Mike swam into her mind, and she gave herself over once more to her memories of the previous night. The glass shivered, and beads of condensation formed on its surface.

Sue had moved forward so that she was almost touching her reflection, and if she'd looked, she would have seen what appeared to be tiny hands and mouths extruding very slightly from the mirror, trying to touch her. A tall, shadowy figure stood behind her, eager to taste her heat. Its hands slipped even lower, and now she was completely engrossed in the dream, feeling everything. Her moans grew louder, and Mike started to stir. Whispers filled the air, warning; she sighed as the heat withdrew, leaving her feeling sweaty and slightly dissatisfied. Mike seemed a little surprised when she walked into the living room and climbed onto his lap, but she was pleased to see he didn't need much persuasion.

For a while, Mike wandered around with a pleasantly dazed expression. Their love life seemed to have taken an incredible leap, and while he didn't want to complain, he couldn't help but wonder why. He wasn't about to ruin things by asking her what was going on, though. He often found her daydreaming in front of the mirror, and congratulated himself on a good buy. It was probably the most successful present he'd ever bought her.

He noticed a smear on it one day, and taking his handkerchief out of his pocket, went to clean it before Sue had a chance to see. As he touched the glass, it seemed to hum, and Mike was tugged towards it. He couldn't move. Things swam up out of the glass to look at him, things with silver eyes and hungry mouths. He felt their breath on his face, smelt their stench, but he couldn't pull away. Needle sharp teeth scraped lightly down his cheek, and he cried out. The humming soared into a scream and he was thrown across

the hall, landing in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. He sat there, shivering, disgusted with himself. He felt frightened, violated. Worse, he felt sick with desire.

Sue came running into the hall to see what was wrong and he pulled her down to the floor, stopping her questions with a kiss. Then he was on her, and they were rutting right there. He couldn't call it lovemaking, it was just sex; greedy and fast and as far from his normal gentleness as it was possible to get. Sue matched his passion, and that worried him more than anything afterwards.

When they were done, she didn't say a word; just went and stood in front of the mirror, gazing into its depths as if it held all the answers. Mike headed straight for the shower. He didn't know what had happened, and he didn't want to know. He just wanted to forget it.

Sue seemed to change after that. Not in a bad way, he thought, she was just different. More outgoing, adventurous. She seemed to take what had happened as a sign that it was time for change. He came home one day to find she had completely repainted the hall in a rich red colour. She was perched on top of a stepladder, stretching to reach the last bit of the wall at the top, and she was wearing one of his shirts. *Just* one of his shirts.

"What on earth are you doing?"

She grinned, before carefully putting the roller into the tray and coming back down the ladder.

"Nothing really. I just didn't think the old colour suited the mirror." She was still gazing into it, distracted, though he couldn't see anything that fascinating.

"Didn't suit the mirror?"

"That's right. It wasn't dramatic enough." She looked at him then, frowning slightly. "Don't you like it?" He sighed, and decided not to make a big thing of it. So what if she wanted to liven things up a little.

"Yes, I like it. You just surprised me, that's all." She started walking towards him, unbuttoning the shirt as she came, and he watched, breathless. She was beautiful.

"Don't you like surprises?"

"Of course I do, it's just..." They never got any further. She kissed him, hard, and her hands were on his belt, undoing his zip. She pushed him against the living room door then let him lift her. Somehow along the way she had taken off the shirt and was naked. He turned to support her against the wall and kissed her breasts, her neck. When he entered her she cried out, and he wasn't sure whether it was in passion or pain. At that moment, he didn't care. It was probably the most intense sex they'd ever had, and at its height – as he was driving into her - he looked up and saw she was watching their reflections in the mirror, her face hungry. He faltered, and then she was back with him, properly with him, and it was incredible.

She began to spend more and more time in front of the mirror. If she wasn't watching it, she was cleaning it, or just touching it, an odd expression on her face. Mike didn't say anything, convinced she'd get bored soon enough, and he quite liked the way she had become more assertive. He drew the line at having the mirror in the bedroom, though. She seemed too remote when it was nearby. And he was starting to get twitchy around mirrors in general, if he was honest. The dressing table mirror was enough to contend with in there.

Gradually, though, things changed. Sue grew listless and pale, a shadow of the vibrant woman of only a few weeks earlier. Although she persisted for a long time in denying that anything was wrong, eventually she had to admit that she was worried too.

One night, as Mike was sitting up in bed with a book, Sue came to bed wearing a sheer white nightdress that billowed around her like a cloud of dry ice. He couldn't remember ever seeing it before. Just for a moment, she seemed almost to be in soft focus, as if seen through a layer of gauze. Mike went cold. She looked like some Victorian spectre, desperate to warn of an impending doom. Then she came forward and climbed into bed beside him, cuddled up to him for warmth. She was shaking. Mike put down his book and held her tight, shocked at how fragile she felt. It was like holding a bundle of sticks.

"What's wrong?"

She buried her head against his chest and he stroked her hair. He waited,

not wanting to put her off. When she finally did speak her voice was muffled and small, adding to the feeling that she wasn't quite there. It was like trying to hold an echo.

"I'm scared."

"What of?"

She hesitated before answering him, and he sensed her casting around for the right answer, the most believable answer. "The mirror."

That threw him. He felt her grow tense, waiting for what she was sure his response would be.

It was impossible, but in the back of his mind he knew she was right. Or else they were both mad. All the unease he had felt since he bought the mirror came flooding back, and he could taste the fear coating the back of his throat like slime. He tried to sound down to earth, to ease her mind.

"Don't tell me you've broken it already." She wouldn't even look at him.

"No. I wish I had, though."

"Sue!"

"I'm sorry. I know you went to a lot of trouble, but..." She hesitated before continuing. "I feel like it watches me."

What the hell was he supposed to say to that? He'd thought that his own experiences with it had been fed by Sue's obsession, but that had been an excuse, one he'd clung to for far too long. "I know what you're thinking. I must be going mad. But it's true. Every time I go past the damn thing I seem to get sidetracked. I find myself reliving some memory or other, and when I come to myself I can see it in the mirror. It's still there!"

She was crying openly now, tears streaming down her face, and she made no attempt to stop them. "But that's not the worst part. Lately, when I look at it, I feel like it's trying to pull me in."

Mike took a deep breath, careful not to rush in. She couldn't be right. There was absolutely no way a mirror could do anything like that. They could be creepy, sure, but that was down to a trick of the light, or suggestion. But there was something wrong with this one, she was right about that. The immediate answer was just to get rid of the damn thing, then hope that life showed some sign of going back to normal. He could take some time off

work; maybe whisk her away somewhere for a few weeks.

"We'll get rid of it, okay? First thing in the morning. But you've got to promise me one thing." She looked at him, eyes wide; afraid of what might be coming. "I want you to come and see Doctor Morris with me in the morning."

"I'm not mad." She was angry now.

"I know. I just want you to have a check up, that's all. I just want to make sure there's nothing physical causing this." She started to cry, so he didn't say any more. He felt slightly guilty about suggesting it might be a physical illness. If it was, then he was infected too. He pulled her to him, and smoothed her hair as she cried. Sleep was a long time coming.

Mike woke the next morning to the sound of Sue calling him. It sounded as if she was far away, fading into the distance.

"Suze?" He felt for her, but she was gone. The sheets on her side of the bed were cold. He leapt out and hurried down the stairs, looking for her.

She was nowhere to be seen. And yet he could still hear her, somewhere in the distance, calling for him. It sounded like she was crying. He started running through the house room by room, calling her name. He had visions of finding her hurt – maybe she'd fallen. Several times he thought he'd found her, but it was just a mirror reflecting him rushing past, his speed blurring and doubling the image momentarily. What else could it be? When he ran out of rooms to check, he went back to the kitchen and flung open the back door – there was only the garden left.

Mike was standing by the back door, shivering, when the idea of the car occurred to him. He ran back into the house for his clothes, desperate not to lose any more time. What if she'd left the house while he was searching for her, and was wandering the streets somewhere, sleepwalking? He found his keys and raced for the Mondeo. He had turned on the engine and was actually pulling out when he glanced into the rear view mirror. Her eyes stared back at him, imploring, just for a moment. Letting out a cry, he slammed on the brakes and stopped just in time to avoid hitting the tree outside their house.

He put his head in his hands and cried. He walked back into the hall and

stopped in front of the mirror. She'd been right all along. She'd been telling him the truth and now it had her. He wished he'd smashed it when she first told him, just to keep her happy. Now she was gone, and he had no idea how he was going to get her back

He looked into its depths, searching for some clue. There was nothing. And yet...he could smell her perfume, so close he could have been standing right next to her. The air seemed to ripple, as if she had just passed by. When he looked into the mirror, he saw only himself. Yet when he looked away again, there it was. A fleeting glimpse of something white in the corner of his eye, that disappeared every time he looked directly at it. He looked away and then straight back, quickly; and this time he saw it. Something white, like the tail of Sue's nightdress, disappearing around a corner that wasn't there.

He must have stood in front of the mirror for at least an hour, hoping to see Sue again – to catch her as she passed by, before he thought of the shop. He got back in the car and drove to Lilith's. It was gone. Where it had stood there was an empty lot, boarded up and plastered with peeling posters. It had been empty for a long time by the look of it; there was no way he could have bought it here.

What was going on? He started to drive back home, and halfway there he saw Sue again. She was in the mirror, screaming soundlessly. Then she was gone. The sound of horns blaring brought him back to himself, and he drove through the lights in a daze. His face was wet with tears he couldn't even feel falling.

Reaching the house once more, he steeled himself to walk inside. In one way, he never wanted to set foot in the place again. Not without Sue. On the other hand, he couldn't bear to leave a place that had so many happy memories of their life together. He had a feeling that staying there was his best chance to get her back.

He made his way back up to the bedroom, shedding his jacket and shoes on the way. Even though it was still morning, he fell asleep almost immediately. Dimly, he was aware that if he couldn't get her back soon, he'd have to report her missing.

He didn't want to think about that yet.

\* \* \*

Sue found herself wandering in what looked like a vast grey vault, with no beginning and no end. It surrounded her completely, but if she didn't try to look at something specific, she could make out strangely feral shadows dancing at the corners of her vision. She shivered, suddenly cold. There was no draught that she could feel, in fact the air seemed strangely stale; but it was freezing, just the same. It was like standing in a chiller cabinet. She wrapped her arms tight around herself and stamped her feet, hoping it would warm her a little.

She could remember leaving Mike in the bedroom and going downstairs to make the tea. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she had knocked against the corner of the mirror; or so she had thought. With hindsight, she believed the mirror had deliberately rocked, just a little. Just enough to catch her eye.

She'd reached out to steady it, and had accidentally touched the glass. It had rippled, and something had sucked her straight through. It felt like being doused in ice water. A gust of wind tugged at her nightdress, and whipped her round to face the way she had come. Shadows skittered away, seeking to stay just out of clear sight. She heard something hiss in the darkness and cried out, but when she looked there was nothing there, she was alone.

She could still see the mirror, and beyond that the stretch of hall and the stairs; but it all seemed too bright, as if she had been stuck in a dark room for hours. She turned to see what was behind her, and saw a copy of the usual view, but in reverse. But that was all. The background cut off exactly where it did in the back view of the mirror. Then there was just ...nothing. Greyness as far as she could see.

For a while, she stayed where she was, hoping that Mike would find her, get her out. She tried touching the mirror, but it was so cold that she could feel her skin sticking to it, and she pulled her hands back quickly. They were blue, and the ache in her wrists was bone deep. She folded her arms, digging

her hands deep into her armpits for warmth.

After a while, she decided Mike wasn't going to figure it out any time soon – it was time to explore. If there was a way in, there had to be a way out, right?

It seemed like she had been walking for hours when she came across a faint point of light, far off in the distance. It was another mirror. She looked behind her, trying to gauge how far she had come, but could see nothing. As she moved closer to the mirror, she could see another room. It looked like a public toilet.

On this side lay a row of stalls, a line of neon lights and part of a tiled floor. As Sue watched, a woman came into the room – the real room, not this insipid reflection – and made straight for the mirror, rummaging in her handbag as she came. She looked at a point just to Sue's right and started to brush her hair. Almost too scared to look, Sue turned her head, so slowly she could hear the tendons creak. She was there, although dimly. Same blond hair, same overdone make up, but dimmer. The reflection gave no sign of being anything other than that, and Sue was so terrified she couldn't have made a sound if she'd tried. The woman on the outside shifted her gaze suddenly so that she was looking straight at Sue. No. Not at her, at something just behind her. Her eyes widened, and she paused in the act of lowering the brush. She was scared. Sue couldn't bring herself to look behind her at what the reflected woman could see. She watched, scarcely breathing, as the woman hurriedly replaced her brush and backed away from the mirror, grappling with the clasp on her handbag as she went. Then she turned and left the restroom as fast as she could without actually running. Plucking up the courage to look to one side, Sue watched the reflection do the same thing. Only instead of leaving, it just sort of dwindled, reducing in size until it winked out. Sue edged away from the mirror. She didn't want to know what had made the woman run; she just wanted to get out of there. Something behind her giggled slyly, and her nerve broke. She cut to one side, and ran.

She didn't stop for a long time, until her legs felt as if they were on fire and she couldn't breathe without a sharp pain stabbing up into her lungs. Ahead of her was another mirror, but this one was very small, like a letterbox.

She approached it slowly, almost scared to look into it. She spent what felt like forever staring around her, but it couldn't have been more than a minute looking first in one direction, then the other. When she was sure there was no sign of anyone else, she stretched up to gaze into it.

Mike was just below her, staring off into the distance, a grim expression on his face. She banged on the wall, screaming his name. He couldn't hear her. She rested her head against the glass and cried.

Just then he looked up. His face went white, and she saw him lurch in his seat, forcing his vision forward again. He was in the car! She threw herself back quickly – he couldn't help her if he was dead.

She had to find another way, had to keep moving. She could wait forever for someone to rescue her, and God knew what was in here with her. She forced herself to keep on walking, hoping that somewhere not too far away was a way out, or at least a safe place to rest for a while.

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Mike woke up to find his pillow soaked with tears. His dreams had been filled with Sue –the way she had of looking shyly up at him while she was laughing, embarrassed by something he had said; the way she slept curled up like a child way over on her side of the bed, duvet wrapped tightly around her; the way she snaked over to insinuate herself into his space when she was cold – legs enveloping him, arms wrapped round him, at least at those times she gave some of the duvet back.

Rubbing his face, he sat up in bed and reached for the pack of cigarettes on the side table. Empty. Resigned to an early morning cigarette run he threw back the covers and made his way along the hall to the bathroom. He had to figure out some way to get Sue back, and he had to do it today. He showered quickly, keeping the mirror in view – he was too spooked to turn his back on one now, besides, Sue might find a way to communicate somehow – then dressed and made his way downstairs. He stood in front of the mirror and waited for a long time, before admitting it was too late. Wherever she was, Sue had long since moved on. The mirror stared blandly back. Losing his

temper suddenly, he grabbed the little table where they kept keys and letters and launched it at the glass. It didn't break.

For just a moment, it held the table immobile; then it flexed and launched the table back at him in a blaze of lightning. He found himself flying through the air, smelling his nose hairs singeing. He landed on the floor in a heap, feeling like one big bruise while his heart stuttered in his chest, desperately trying to re-establish its normal rhythm. His mouth opened in a big 'O' of surprise as he gasped for breath. He lay there, watching the mirror as the glass roiled like smoke caught in a box – a storm with nowhere to happen. Then it was only a mirror again. Just like that – the transition too quick to register. It simply hung there, bland and lifeless, reflecting the hall and nothing else.

But he knew better now.

The shop was long gone. But he couldn't believe that this had never happened before. There must be some information about it somewhere. He had to learn everything about mirrors. Well, not about mirrors as such – he had no interest in the making of them, the mechanics. He had to find out all the mythology surrounding mirrors, all the superstitions. There had to be a clue in there somewhere, if he could just find it.

Sue was way beyond tired. She was bone weary. She felt as if she had been walking for days. As far as she knew, her watch was still working properly; she'd had no indication that things should be otherwise. She had gone downstairs at about seven in the morning, and it was now a quarter past seven in the evening. That felt about right. She kept on walking, slowly; sure she must come upon something soon.

Sure enough, there was a mirror up ahead, slightly off to her left. She was too tired to pick up her speed, and so she just made her way slowly over to it, keeping an eye out for anything or anyone that might be looking for her.

The room reflected this time was a bedroom, much like her own; and her heart ached at the cosy familiarity of it. There was natural light filtering through, not lamplight, so she had been right about the approximate time. The room was chintzy – pine bed and furniture, decorated in creams, with

flowery curtains and bed linen. It was a bit country cottage for her taste, but welcoming nonetheless. Cosmetics littered the top of the dressing table, and a drawer sat half open, lingerie spilling out of it.

Tentatively, Sue walked forward, touched the bed on her side. It was solid, but very cold and hard. At least it was a bed. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

She sat gratefully, then lay down, wrapping the duvet around her like a cocoon. She started to think about Mike – whether he had any idea where to look for her; and felt the tears start again.

The sound of a door slamming woke her up, and it took her a moment to remember where she was. The light had faded noticeably, half the room was now in shadow. She found herself checking the corners, wary of another one of those things lurking in the darkness. The room looked more or less the same, except that a door Sue hadn't noticed before stood open, pouring out buttery light in a narrow stream. Could it be a bathroom? On this side, light was pouring through, as if through water, illuminating a patch of whatever this place was a little further on. She threw the duvet off and moved to get out of the bed – then drew her feet back when it struck that there might be something underneath. Gingerly, she leant forward, and lifted the sheet that hung to the floor. Nothing. Heaving a sigh of relief she climbed off the bed, and made for the light.

She was in luck. A whole wall was mirrored, so that on this side there was a complete reflection. Everything was intact, and it was glorious. She made her way to the washbasin and turned on the tap. She groaned in frustration when no water flowed.

A middle-aged woman walked into the bathroom. Sue watched as she walked towards the washbasin and turned the tap on. Yes! Water splashed into the washbasin on her side, too. She plunged her hands into the water and splashed it all over face and neck. In her relief, she completely ignored the pale reflection of the woman performing her ablutions beside her. Their disregard, it seemed, was mutual. She hurriedly cupped some water in her hands and drank, hoping the woman wouldn't notice the movement in the

mirror. Something about the way she moved suggested her eyes weren't too good, but there was no point taking unnecessary chances.

It looked as if she'd been right – the woman had finished washing and was making her way carefully back to the door, using one outstretched hand to guide her. She reached for the light and just before she switched it off, she turned and looked straight at the mirror.

“Good night.”

Sue froze, feeling as if her spine was made of ice. The light went out, and soft breath touched the back of her neck in the darkness. She felt the skin there crawl, but couldn't move. A fingernail traced the line of her neck, and her legs failed her. Whatever it was laughed as she slid gracelessly to the floor. She caught sight of something grey and too thin as it rounded the corner, then she was alone once more.

Sitting there, against the wall, she curled herself into a ball and rocked to and fro. She didn't want to see any more. She wanted to go home.

Most of all, she wanted Mike.

Mike sat in the library, surrounded by books on folklore and the supernatural; case studies of all kinds of strange occurrences. He was looking for anything to do with mirrors, and there wasn't much. Looking at the clock, he was surprised to see that it was gone four o'clock – almost teatime, and he hadn't eaten at all yet. No wonder he was hungry.

So far, all he had discovered was that certain tribes believed a photograph would steal your soul; that vampires didn't reflect in mirrors; and that if a virgin looked in a mirror at midnight on Halloween, she would see her true love appear over her shoulder.

Bullshit.

It was all bullshit, although he supposed there had to be something to it, some little fact that had been distorted and twisted like in a game of Chinese Whispers, until you could no longer tell where the truth lay.

Discouraged, he sat back in his chair and stretched his legs. There was a woman watching him, eyes glued to the books he was wading his way through, chewing her nails. She glanced up and caught him looking at her.

Embarrassed, she flushed a deep red and looked away. She looked as if she was struggling for a moment, then she turned back to him.

"I was wondering..." She stared at him for a moment, uncertain, and Mike did his best to look encouraging. "If you're finished with the books?"

"Oh! Yes, yes I am. I couldn't find much, I'm afraid." She smiled, but her attention was already on the pile of books he was pushing over to her. Her eyes were bloodshot, the skin around them red and puffy. Lines of strain were etched onto her face. He wondered why she was so upset. She had completely forgotten that he was there, and so he watched her, curious. She rifled through the pages, flipping them over faster and faster as she searched, stopping only when she came to a scrap of information – at which point she'd scribble it down in a notebook before resuming her frantic search. She was stopping at many of the same pages he had. She was researching mirrors.

It took her maybe an hour to go through all the books. He watched the light die in her eyes as she realised there was no help to be found within. She slammed the last book shut with a cry, quickly stifled. He knew how she felt. She looked up then, realising for the first time that he was still sitting there. Suspicion dawned in her eyes, and she dropped her gaze, running her fingers across the title of the top book. The librarian seized her chance and scuttled over to rescue the books, obviously upset by such cavalier treatment. When she'd moved off, the woman's seat was empty, and he looked round just in time to see the door swing shut. He'd scared her. Aware that he might be making things worse, but knowing he had no choice if he was to find out anything new, he followed her. She kept her head down, and was rushing up the hill towards the station, oblivious to anything in her path. He still hadn't quite closed the gap when he saw her step off the kerb to cross the hill – seemingly unaware that a lorry was bearing down on her fast.

"Look out!" He ran forward, managing to get an arm around her waist and haul her backwards. She screamed and beat at his arms, then screamed again as the lorry flashed past, the rush of air carrying her cry with it. She wasn't fighting any more. He moved his arm to her shoulder, and led her away from the kerb – she came without argument, still too shocked to do more than acquiesce.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded, and drew away from his grip, smoothing her dress down, trying to regain some sense of control. When she spoke, the steel in her voice belied her fragile appearance.

"Just who the hell are you?"

"My name's Mike. I saw you in the library, remember?"

"I remember you staring at me, yes."

"Do you remember I had all the books you wanted? Do you remember that? Or would you rather just think I'm some guy who wanted to cop a feel when he saw a chance?"

She had the good grace to appear embarrassed at that, and looked at him more carefully this time.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm a little more shaken than I thought." She smiled at him, trying to make peace, but the expression looked too brittle, and she soon dropped the attempt. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No." He couldn't bring himself to come right out with it, it sounded too weird, even if he did suspect she knew exactly what he meant. "Just the usual mirror folklore. Nothing useful." Her eyes widened as she took the information in, and he knew he was right. They stared at each other as they realised the possibility of someone else being in the same predicament.

They watched each other warily for a moment, neither quite sure of how to broach such a subject. It wasn't exactly easy to ask someone you'd just met whether they'd recently lost a loved one to a mirror. Mike took the first step.

"Let me buy you a drink. I think we should have a chat, don't you?" She nodded, but said nothing. Looking around, she gestured further up the hill.

"Isn't there a pub just up that way?"

Mike nodded. "Yes, the Cherry Tree. That's as good a place as any, I suppose."

They walked in silence, and it was surprisingly comfortable. The wall as they went through the first set of doors was mirrored, and there was a hiss as they passed it. Mike recoiled, dragging his companion away, and she clung to him. Grey fingers clutched at his arm, and more grabbed her hair, making her cry out. He batted at the hands, and they withdrew, the creature's eyes

glowing cold and silver in the darkened reflection. Then there was nothing, and they pushed the second set of doors, bolting into the pub itself. The patrons looked up, puzzled, but when no row was forthcoming for their entertainment they went back to their conversations. The barman looked nervous – he wasn't sure if they were going to be trouble or not. Mike was shaking, and the girl took one look at his horrified face and dragged him bodily over to a booth in the corner. She left him sitting there while she went to the bar. She returned a few minutes later with a brandy for each of them and sat down facing him, waiting for him to speak. He shuddered, and cleared his throat.

"I don't suppose you know what the hell that thing was, do you?" He gulped at the brandy, and choked as it burned its way down his throat. "I mean...you didn't exactly seem horrified by it."

She looked at him for a moment, as if she was trying to figure out whether he could be trusted. Then she nodded, and took a deep breath, and said: "It's a 'wraith', I guess that's what you'd call it. I've seen them in the mirror at home, watching me."

"You've seen them?"

"For a little while now." She smiled, and carried on – as if she didn't expect him to believe a word of it. "Since I lost..."

"Since it took someone." The relief on her face was immense, and he smiled. He knew how she felt. The incongruity of their situation struck him, and he took another sip of his brandy. The world seemed to be slowing down, giving him a chance to catch up. "I don't even know your name."

"Carole." Her voice sounded as tired as she looked, like a tape worn out by too much use.

"Mike." He put out his hand, and was surprised by how small hers felt. She was so tiny. She sat back and smiled, or at least she tried.

"You first."

"I'm sorry?" Taken aback by her directness, he wasn't quite sure what she meant.

"You tell me what happened to you, first. Then," she had the grace to grin at him, "if I don't think you're crazy, I'll tell you what happened to me."

"Fair enough."

It wasn't that easy, though. He sat looking at the girl in front of him and fought an overwhelming urge to cry. Just a few short weeks ago his life had been, if not perfect, pretty close to it. Now it was in shreds, and he couldn't begin to fathom what was going on. He made his voice as flat and emotionless as possible, trying to keep control of himself.

"I bought my wife a mirror as an anniversary present, a few weeks ago." He paused before he went on. "It took her."

He sat there, waiting for her to start edging away, or to walk out, or slap him. He wanted her to do something. All she did was ask: "Where did you buy yours?" Relieved, he downed the brandy and sat back in his chair, smiling. He felt as if he had been set free and now he told her all of it. When he was finished, she was crying with him. The barman was looking at them, bemused, but he didn't think they'd be kicked out as long as they were quiet. After a moment, he prodded her.

"Your turn."

She said nothing for a moment, as if unsure of how to start. When she did speak, she didn't waste any more time. "I didn't get a chance to get a look at what you saw in the mirror just now. Was it her?"

"God, no. It was like a shadow. With teeth, and silvery eyes." He shuddered, and looked back towards the doors, as if afraid of what he would see there, peeping around the door. "I could feel it laughing."

There was silence for a moment, then Carole stood and rushed to the toilet, her face like spoiled milk. Mike went to the bar and ordered another brandy for himself, and a ginger ale for Carole. He had a feeling she was going to need it. As an afterthought, he bought a couple of curled up chicken salad sandwiches that were lurking under a plastic dome on the bar. They were better than nothing.

He was just sitting back down when Carole emerged from the Ladies and made her way back to her seat. Her face was totally colourless, not even white; tendrils of hair down each side were damp and clinging to her skin. She sat down and accepted her drink with a nod of thanks, sipped it carefully. She looked ruefully at the sandwiches. "I'm sorry, I don't think I can..."

"Don't blame you. I just thought you might need something."

"The ginger ale will do just fine, thanks." She sat back with a sigh, and closed her eyes. He waited. She kept her eyes closed as she started to talk. "It's hard, talking about it." She took a deep breath then, and looked at him. "Sorry, stupid thing to say. You know damn well how hard it is."

"His name was *-is-* Adam. We bought a flat together about six months ago, and we were doing it up. I saw the mirror in an antique shop in Camden Passage." She paused then, watched him as she went on. "It was called Lilith's."

"Adam was very into Art Deco," she went on. "The whole flat was done in that style. All that was left was to find a mirror for above the fireplace in the living room. It was perfect...Elegant." She stopped, wiped her eyes. "To tell the truth, it made me feel clumsy. Adam was very good looking, you see. He could have been a model. He and the flat complemented each other perfectly. And he knew it." She caught the startled look Mike threw at her, and laughed. "Oh, I knew he loved himself. I didn't mind that, so long as he loved me too. And he did, in his way. I made him look good." She smiled wryly, looking out of the window. "I made him shine." She stopped again, ventured a peek at him, trying to gauge his reaction. He said nothing.

"I really did love him, Mike. I just knew him too well, I suppose. Adam always put himself first, but I don't think he realised he was doing it. Anyway, we were out for a walk one afternoon. We turned a corner, and there it was. Lilith's Antiques." Mike choked on his drink. "I'm sure you can fill in the rest. Adam saw the mirror and had to have it. Not that I was about to argue with him, I could see how much he loved it. A little too much, as it turned out."

She pushed her chair back and went to the bar without another word. When she came back, she had more brandy for both of them. He was starting to feel a little light headed, but was glad of the relief it brought.

"It went much the same way as you and Sue, from what you've told me. He used to get lost in it, watching it as if he was watching a movie. The expression on his face was..." she searched for the right word. "Rapture. He started to look ill, and I could see he was losing weight. Finally, he came to bed one night shaking. He was terrified. It took me a while to get it out of him,

but in the end he told me. He said when he looked in the mirror it was as if he was watching a cocktail party in the twenties. Girls in gorgeous dresses, men in tuxes. I told him not to think about it. We'd see a doctor in the morning." She laughed, but there was no humour in it at all. "I thought he was having a breakdown. So anyway, the next morning we were woken by laughter, and the sound of people talking, glasses clinking. There was even a piano playing. Adam went to investigate, and I'm sure you can fill in the rest."

"Have you seen him at all?" Mike asked.

"A couple of times. To begin with, he was banging on the glass, begging me to get him out. He seemed to be looking for something, or someone. The last time I saw him he looked as if he'd faded, somehow, and wanted me to join him."

Mike cleared his throat. "I have to get her out before that happens. Will you help me?"

She looked blankly at him, as if she didn't understand what he was getting at. "You're the only one who can; nobody else would ever believe us. We've got to do something. We can't just leave them there, pretend it never happened."

"What if they don't want to be rescued? If Adam's anything to go by, they start to like it in there. And how exactly do we get them out of there in the first place?"

"I don't know." He shook his head, angry. "I really don't know. Yet. But we've got to try." There was nothing else to add. She nodded, and they sat in silence. Looking at his watch, he saw it was past six o'clock now, and realised he was starving. He glanced at Carole, trying to think of the right way to broach the subject of food. She was smiling at him, and he realised she knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Come on, then. Let's go and get something to eat. That was what you were going to ask me, wasn't it?"

"It was, yes. I don't think I'm up to a restaurant, though. I'll cook, if you like, and we can talk more about what to do."

She regarded him steadily for a moment, and he could have kicked himself. She probably thought he was trying to chat her up. Then she nodded,

and stood up, as if he'd passed inspection and been found trustworthy. "Okay, your place it is."

He looked around for another exit, couldn't see one. Carole followed his gaze. "Want me to ask the barman if there's a back way out?"

"Might be an idea, yes." He watched as she went to the bar and beckoned the barman over. She talked to him for a few minutes, but he kept shaking his head. When she came back, she shrugged and smiled.

"He's adamant there isn't one, so I guess we'll just have to make a run for it."

Mike sighed, and heaved himself out of his seat. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

Following Carole to the door, he allowed himself to feel a little more hopeful. If they worked together, maybe they stood a chance. They were through the first set of doors and almost to the outer doors when the mirror exploded into shards of glass and two grey, shadowy arms shot out towards Carole; intent on grabbing her. She froze, unable even to scream. Mike launched himself forward without even thinking and pushed her bodily out through the swing doors and into the daylight. As the light touched the creature it hissed and drew back, releasing her arm. Then it was gone.

Carole clung to him, crying; and he held her tight as much for his benefit as for hers. He needed contact right now, something solid to hold onto. The barman came running out armed with a bat, looking for trouble.

"You okay, miss?"

"She's fine."

The barman steeled himself, and tried to look tough. "I'd like to hear that from the lady, if you don't mind."

"Oh come on! Does it look like she's in trouble?" The barman took a step closer, bat raised, and Mike tried to move Carole so that he was shielding her. He wanted to defuse the situation before it got out of hand. She stood clear of him, and wouldn't allow herself to be moved.

"It's okay, Mike, let me handle it." She turned to smile at the barman, who looked more confused than ever. He'd had Mike pegged as the bad guy, and wanted to act the hero. This wasn't the way he'd expected things to go. She

put an arm around Mike's waist. "I'm fine, honestly. Someone threw a stone as we came through the doors and smashed the glass." She chuckled, shamefaced. "I got a bit of a fright, that's all."

"Who'd throw a stone at you?" He wasn't convinced, and now the realisation that the mirror had been broken had dawned on him – along with the fact it'd probably come out of his wages.

"Kids, I expect. You never know what they'll do, these days." The barman still wasn't happy, but at least he wasn't ready to take a bat to him any more. "I'll pay for the damage, mate. How's that?" The barman nodded, not happy, but glad he wasn't going to be out of pocket, and Mike quickly soothed him with a cheque more than big enough to cover the damages. He took Carole by the arm and started walking back towards the library, where he'd left the car, whispering "Come on, before he starts to think about what we've told him."

When they got to the car, he installed her in the passenger seat and moved round to the drivers' side. Looking in the rear view mirror as little as possible, he set off for home.

Sue came to slowly, still curled up in a little ball on the bathroom floor. She wondered how long she had been lying there, unprotected, and whether anything had watched or even worse, touched her while she was unconscious. She coaxed her stiff limbs into unfolding, and hauled herself upright. She was alone, for now anyway. She could see two ways out of the room she was in. She could either follow that thing from last night, go through the door it had used - or she could go back the way she came and try to find Mike. The thought of Mike decided her, and she headed back towards home. She listened as she went, not wanting another run in with the creature she had seen the night before.

As he unlocked the front door and slowly swung it open, Mike's heart was in his throat. He almost didn't want to go in. He wanted to believe that Sue had found her way home, but wondered if something else had instead.

Entering the quiet hallway felt like being in church. There was a total

absence of sound, and the air itself felt heavy, charged. Cautiously, he approached the mirror.

Nothing. He grabbed Carole's hand and rushed her into the kitchen, and heaved a sigh of relief. Here, at least, everything felt normal. He flicked the light switch and buttery light filled the room, gleaming off the yellow and white tiles. This room had always been one of the most cheerful in the house, the one most obviously stamped with Sue's persona. She had handpicked everything in here, from the floor up. Mike felt a momentary pang as Carole brushed past him and sank appreciatively into a chair, leaning her head on her arms on the kitchen table. He made his way to the fridge and foraged for the makings of a quick dinner. The absurdity of what they were doing struck him, and he leaned his head against the fridge door and cried. This should have been him and Sue, instead of which he was making dinner for a stranger who must be finding it equally as hard, although she'd had more time to get used to it – if that was possible.

Surprised, Carole raised her head and watched him for a moment, unsure of what to do. After a minute, she got up and pulled him away from the fridge, put her arms around him. He clung to her, and after a moment she returned the hug, just wanting to feel normal, if only for a moment. She wasn't sure quite how long they stood there, but after a while she became uncomfortably aware of the smell of him. He was warm and smelled good. Her head nestled neatly into the hollow of his throat, just as it had with Adam. He seemed to feel the same. Just for a moment he squeezed her tighter, then pushed her gently away. Embarrassed, she ushered him back to her seat, made him sit down.

She left him there, and set about frying bacon and eggs, and making tea. The aroma was immediate, and it filled the house with a sense of welcome that eased everything a little. Sneaking a look at Mike, she saw that he had stopped crying. Maybe lunch would give them both a chance to take a step back. Quickly, she slid the food onto the plates and poured the tea, set food and drink on the table. There was silence for a while as they concentrated on their meal, need overcoming wants for a little while.

At last, Mike sat back, determined to figure out a way forward. He had a

feeling that they wouldn't have to wait long. Whoever or whatever was behind all this knew that at least two people had figured out what was going on. They couldn't afford to let that secret get out. They'd be coming for them.

"Where do you think we should start? Here? Or my place?"

He didn't know what to say. He didn't know where to start.

"I've already tried to get through the mirror the way Sue did. Couldn't do it. It threw me right across the hall. I suppose we could try and find the shop again." He put his hands up to stop the inevitable complaint. "Yes, I know the shop disappears. But it has to turn up somewhere, doesn't it?"

"That could take months!" She was appalled. "What happens to them in the meantime?"

"It won't." He couldn't look at her, couldn't even begin to think about the alternative. "I'm sure it won't. I think we'll be lucky."

"And pigs might fly!" She was furious, and he couldn't blame her. If he was wrong, he was consigning both Sue and Adam to a fate that he didn't even want to think about. There was no other way that he could see. She struggled with it, and as he watched her he could see the thoughts flying through her mind, could see her coming to the same conclusion, just as reluctantly as he had. "Shit."

He smiled sadly. "My thoughts exactly." He got the A-Z from the drawer and they pored over it, trying to determine the most likely areas to search. He wondered if they would, indeed, see any flying pigs. It didn't seem any more unlikely than what they were searching for.

Sue had only been walking for a little while when she noticed the echo her footsteps were making. An echo - where only moments before the only sound had been a muffled slap as her bare feet hit the ground.

There it was again, slightly out of step this time. She began to hurry, eager to get home, or to this side's version of it, at least, before whatever it was managed to catch up with her. She was pretty sure she could see home just ahead, and broke in to a run. The footsteps behind her sped up too, making no effort to ape her steps any more. She paid no attention to what was behind her now; she just wanted to get to Mike. She was just in time to see him hurry

a woman past the mirror into the kitchen. What was he doing? She leant against the glass and wept, stopping only when she heard the mocking laughter coming from just behind her.

There was nowhere else to run, and if she had to lose, she at least wanted to put a name to the beast. Turning around, she confronted what had been following her.

It had been a man, at some time. He was more solid than the grey things she had seen, and looked more or less normal, but he had a curious faded quality. He looked like an old black and white photograph that had been out in the sun for too long. He stood leaning against the wall, arms folded, watching her with an expression of amused contempt. He took a step towards her, and she automatically retreated. He stopped, a wry smirk on his face.

"I look that bad already, do I?" His voice was cultured, smooth; quite attractive. She found herself thinking of Cary Grant.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Adam." He looked down at his hands, raised them to his eyes and tried to see through them. "At least I was. The lady who just went rushing past the mirror with your lover is...*was*...my girlfriend, Carole." He grinned, his face etched with the pain of that fact, and drifted a little closer to the mirror. "Small world."

She tried to keep her distance. Up close he was terrifying. He saw her expression, and his smile faded into a wistful look that was heartbreaking.

"You haven't been here long, have you? You're still all there, unlike me. I don't think I have all that long left."

"I don't understand..."

He saw her distress and relented. "The mirror took me too. Although I've been here a bit longer than you, obviously." He swept his arm across himself in a flamboyant wave, as if he was taking a bow. "Hence the fade."

"The fade?"

"That's what we do here. We fade. The sisters feed, and we fade."

"The sisters?" She felt like a fool, repeating everything he said, but was overcome by the surreal sensation that she had wandered into a bad film.

Everything was so bizarre.

"God, you really don't know anything, do you? Where did you buy your mirror?"

"I didn't. It was an anniversary..." She stopped then, as everything clicked into place. He smiled again, but it was a more predatory expression this time.

"Exactly. I bought mine myself, and I've been here for a while now, probably a couple of weeks." He looked down at himself, or what was left of him, and his face wrinkled in disgust. "I don't look too good now, do I?" There was no answer to that.

"There must be a way out. If we look together..."

"We will get absolutely nowhere. Believe me, I've tried." He took pity on her, then, and started to explain. "The sisters trap people through their mirrors. I don't know how they do it. I don't know what they are; or how old they are. They feed off our energy, until we fade – and become those wraiths that lurk in the shadows here. Once that happens, we're completely theirs. The wraiths seem to do whatever they're told."

"You've seen them? Up close?"

"Yes, just once."

"What did they say to you?" He had the decency to look a little ashamed of himself.

"Nothing. I turned a corner and there they were. I turned back around and ran like hell."

"Didn't they come after you?"

"They didn't have to, did they? There's nowhere to go. This place has so many twists and turns, but I don't think they really lead anywhere." He paused then, looked around, and his next words were so quiet he could have been talking to himself, as if he had forgotten she was there. "They laughed. They knew it was only a matter of time before I was one of them." He looked down at his hands, and then held them up so she could see them properly. "That must be why you're here. I don't have long left. See?" His fingers didn't look right, she noticed. They were very pale, of course, but it was more than that. They looked too long, too thin, and oddly flattened. He drew them back

in and cradled them against his chest, and continued. "I bought the mirror in an antique shop called Lilith's."

She started at that, and he grinned. "Ah. I see you recognise the name. As soon as I saw it, I had to have it. It was perfect. And when I got it home I was even more convinced. I saw such magical things in it... parties, dances. At the time, I thought I was just daydreaming – but it was so vivid I could have reached out and walked right into it, if I wanted. That's how it made me feel. That's what made me want it."

He gazed up at the mirror Sue had been watching through and his face took on a dreamy quality. Wherever he was now, it wasn't here with her. "I was hooked. And then one day I was looking into it, 'imagining' a cocktail party – all those beautiful women, dressed in their finery – and the most beautiful woman there turned and spoke to me. *To me*. She reached out as if to take my hand, asked me to join the party. I was so far into it I didn't even realise I'd reached out too. Before I knew what was happening she'd grabbed it and hauled me through to this side. Then, of course, I could see what she really was. She was one of those wraiths."

Sue shivered, and he smiled. "Needless to say, there was no party, no woman; just a group of wraiths that disappeared around a corner as soon as I was completely through." He looked at her then, not smiling now. "You know the rest, I'm sure."

She nodded. She did know. She was living it herself, after all. And if Mike didn't get to her...she closed off that thought fast, and focussed on what Adam was telling her.

"Who are the sisters? What do they have to do with all this?"

"The weird sisters *are* Lilith's antiques, if you'll pardon the pun." The tone of his voice belied the humour of his words, and Sue shivered. "I don't know what they are, exactly, but I know what we are to them." He stopped then, and Sue prompted him.

"What, Adam?"

"Food."

There was nothing to say that would change that, or make it easier. They went back to watching the mirror, waiting to see what would happen on the

other side.

Silence reigned in the kitchen. Discussions over the A-Z had come to nothing, and they'd reached an impasse. Mike wanted to do more research, Carole wanted to get up and do something, even if she didn't know what to do. In the end, he gave up.

"All right, let's go. We may as well just drive into town and start looking."

"Okay. We have to do something, at least." They made their way into the hall, and Mike almost bumped into her when she stopped dead in front of the mirror. Looking up, he saw Carole reaching out towards it, fingers almost touching the glass, crying. When he saw what she was looking at, his warning died in his throat.

Sue was standing there, beating on the glass and crying. A man was standing behind her, with his hand moulded against Carole's. The look of longing on his face was almost unbearable. Then the glass frosted and turned an angry looking red. They felt rather than heard the cry of pain from the other side. When the glass cleared, they were gone. Mike pulled Carole away from the mirror, more determined than ever. "Come on. Let's get started."

When the mirror frosted over, Sue and Adam leaped back; something that probably saved their lives. As it was, the burst of heat was powerful enough to throw them back against the wall. They sat on the floor coughing, waiting for their eyes to stop tearing. When the heat died down they looked back at the mirror. It still pulsed a dull red, and they could feel that it was still hot. They weren't going to be allowed to look through that one anymore. They were still being watched, she was sure; but couldn't see anything. She took a step away from Adam, feeling self-conscious.

"What do we do now?"

Adam looked around, trying to get his bearings and determine the best way forward.

"Lilith's was different for you, wasn't it?"

"Not for me, for Mike."

"Yes, yes. So it was two different places." He sighed, exasperated at her

incomprehension. "It has to pop up somewhere else then, doesn't it? We're not going to last forever." He looked at her for a long time, before saying: "I hate to tell you this, but you're starting to fade."

She looked at her hands. They were almost completely white, with a faint bluish tinge, as if she had dipped them in ice-cold water. She felt sick.

"How long?"

"Before you're too far gone? I don't know. But I don't think it's very long before we start to sink."

"Sink?"

"Deeper. It doesn't feel like air, does it? Haven't you noticed?" He looked around again, swept his arms around slowly, his movements slow and languorous. "It feels like ice water. This whole place is some sort of psychic pool, and we're drowning slowly." He took her hand, led her away from the mirror. "We have to find where Lilith's pops up this time."

Sue watched him for a moment, then withdrew her hand. There was something he wasn't saying here, and she wasn't going anywhere until she knew what it was. He came to her, cupped her face in his hands, making her shiver. "I don't have as long as you. *I'm starting to like it!*"

He spoke with a quiet intensity, scaring her badly. He wasn't being friendly now.

"I've seen such things here. I wander the halls, looking into all the mirrors, and I see such things. People fight, they make love, they have parties and dinners, and they do it all in front of me." His lips were brushing her forehead now, but she was too frightened to try and pull away. "All sorts of perversions in all sorts of places. I tried not to look, at first, really I did." His grip grew tighter now; she could feel his breath coming faster. "I so want to touch you like that...I know its wrong, but I want..." With a gasp he let her go, pushed her away from him, and she scrambled to the furthest wall. He turned away, shuddering, and when he turned to face her once more he had got himself under control again. "I don't have long." He stretched out his hand once more, his gaze steady, imploring her to trust him. She didn't – not for a moment – but what choice did she have but to go with him? She nodded, and moved to stand beside him, let him hold her hand and lead her on once more.

For Mike, time seemed to have telescoped, and he was stuck at the wrong end. They had driven round and round the streets surrounding where he had first seen Lilith's, but found nothing. So they had spread their search inwards, heading towards the centre of town. Waiting for the traffic lights to turn green at Centre Point, he saw a club across the road that he had gone to in his youth. He had known it as a disco called the Sundown, on Tottenham Court Road. Workmen were busy putting up a new sign, and Mike beamed when he saw it go up. LILITH'S.

So there it was. He nudged Carole, and pointed it out. She smiled and nodded, and they drove off to find a car park, positive the answers were inside.

Sue and Adam were exhausted. They had wandered through the winding corridors for hours, looking into every mirror they came across, large or small. They had been unwilling spectators to household quarrels, both completely banal and frighteningly violent. The first had been an utterly bizarre argument between an elderly couple in their kitchen about the pepper pot. They sat there, at the kitchen table, and bickered back and forth about whether it was china or plastic. In the end, the man had thrown it as hard as he could at the wall beneath the mirror, causing Sue to flinch – much to Adam's amusement. It had smashed, and both the man and the woman had sat and stared at it for what seemed like ages. Then the woman had nodded. 'You were right, love. It was china.' He'd grunted in agreement, and they'd gone back to their dinner as if nothing had happened. In the next mirror, a young couple had been discussing whether to have a baby. She wanted to, he saw it as something that would only come between them. Sue felt as if her heart would break, watching the girl try to convince her partner that nothing would change, he would always be the centre of her world. He'd known different, even if she hadn't, and wasn't ready to share her. Finally, in tears, she'd broken down and confessed that she was already pregnant. It had come as a shock to both of them when he'd turned around and punched her in the stomach, then pushed her to the floor and started to kick – not stopping till the bleeding started, and he knew there would be no baby. The worst shock

of all had been the girl's whispered: "*I'm sorry.*" Sue wondered who the apology had been offered to – her child for her failure to protect it from its own father, or to her partner for upsetting him and making him doubt her love. She had a feeling it was probably a mixture of both.

They had watched couples making love, couples fighting, children and spouses being beaten, a robbery and even a couple of suicides, and she was beginning to despair of human nature. Her partner, if that was what he was, was lingering just a little too long at each scene for her liking, living vicariously now, as if he knew that was all he had left. He seemed to know who he was again, at least; but she got the impression that his grip on that fact was tenuous at best. She looked down at her hands again, and wished she hadn't – they were almost monochrome now.

They turned the next corner, and stopped dead. One wall was a huge mirror, and it seemed to be a window onto some sort of nightclub. The place was packed, people were dancing – a mass of bodies writhing to the insistent beat that came pounding through the floor and walls.

Across from them there was an ice-blue neon sign, announcing the name of the nightclub in pulses of light in time to the beat. 'LILITH'S.' There were wraiths here, too; hanging around on the periphery of her vision, mingling with the reflected crowd.

The air turned colder, thicker; and they stiffened, unwilling just yet to turn around. The mirror frosted with ice, breaking the view. The world was sharply drawn in shades of ice now, and there was nothing to do but face up to what waited for her. Taking a deep breath she turned around, and gasped. Adam flinched, then turned to join her. He was cringing as if in pain, a strange half-smile on his face as if he relished feeling something, even that.

Wraiths had drifted in behind them, and surrounded them on all sides. Even they were cringing from what was in their midst. The sisters were floating there, about a foot off the floor – their hair, ice white, streamed out to all sides, moved by unseen currents, and their intertwined bodies seemed lit from within. They were flawless. They watched silently, amused by the tableau in front of them, seeming unaware of the chill. Sue wasn't cold anymore, either. She was numb. She could see her breath roiling in front of

her, and could see the ice glinting on the walls. She didn't have long now. She could feel it, could feel the heat leaching out of her.

The sisters floated nearer, gazing down at her, a malign trinity.

"It's time. There's nowhere else to run."

She looked to Adam for help – but he was gone. Even as she watched, the last traces of colour were fading from his skin – his fingers stretched into talons, his eyes darkening until they shone like icy coals. He was almost completely transparent.

The sisters gestured, and he moved forward and grabbed her, held her up for their inspection. They drifted closer.

You know why you are here. We need you for sustenance."

"But I'm not enough, am I?" She sounded far braver than she felt. She just hoped they were convinced.

They said nothing, just watched and waited.

"You only took me a day ago, two at most. But I'm already fading. He took weeks." She was right, she knew it. "You're getting weaker."

"Enough." The force of their reply slapped her back against Adam, and the wraiths moaned and withdrew. Adam loosened his grip a little, but snaked an arm across her stomach, absently stroked it. "We're getting weaker because of the energy needed for *this*." They gestured to the mirror, the crowds dancing on the other side, oblivious to their presence. "It's purely temporary."

"Then who are the people who run Lilith's? I mean, you can't leave here, right?" They rippled slightly, as if unseen currents were being whipped up, and their faces darkened. But they answered.

"They are simulacra, and as such they take a certain amount of ...energy to maintain. It's all part of the circle."

"But you're still getting weaker."

"Ridiculous."

"You must be. If you weren't, why would you risk something like this?" Now it was Sue's turn to gesture at the mirror. "The amount of energy you get from one person doesn't last long enough any more, does it?"

They didn't answer her straight away, and the wraiths grew more and

more restless, their moaning intensifying. They were scared. She braced herself, waiting for the punishment she was sure was coming; but all they did was nod. The ice was getting thicker, and her breath wasn't pluming out anymore. She couldn't have much body heat left.

"Very clever. But what good will it do you?"

She seized her chance. Breaking free of Adam's grip she turned and ran for the mirror, intent on breaking through. Yet the closer she got to the glass, the thicker the air seemed to get, until she felt as if she was swimming. By the time she got to the mirror, it was like sinking in treacle. The air had become a blue mist, swirling around all of them like a fog. The wraiths surrounded her, touching her. It burned where they touched, yet she welcomed the sensation. It felt so good just to feel! They lowered her to the floor and draped themselves over her. She could see Adam hovering nearby, pain etched on his face. He still knew her, and was fighting the impulse to join them in tormenting her. A single tear slid down her cheek and froze there, glittering like diamond. She kept her eyes on his face, and struggled to whisper: "Mike."

Mike waited impatiently in line to get their tickets, trying to ignore the mocking glances of the teenagers queuing to get in to the club. Someone muttered a comment about the oldest swingers in town, and there was a burst of laughter, quickly stifled. Finally their turn came. He paid and pushed his way through into the throbbing underground, pulling Carole behind him. The crowd was heaving in time with the music, and everything was bathed in a hot red half-light. He felt himself break into a sweat within seconds of walking through the door. They made their way down a flight of stairs and pushed deeper into the swell of bodies on the dance floor, heading for the mirror.

As he got closer, he saw the dancers reflected back at him; but behind them, he saw ghostly creatures, oddly thin. Carole clung tight to his hand, and he knew she saw them too. Their eyes shone jet black, and they were huddled around Sue, who was lying on the ground. There were two or three figures leaning over her, he couldn't quite tell how many. There was another figure in the background, watching, its form unclear, as if it kept changing.

The dancers were oblivious to anything but the music. Everything else faded into the background as he approached the mirror, she was all he could see. Her back was to him, and though he couldn't see her face, he knew her well enough to know that she was terrified. As he reached the glass he reached out for her, looking for a way through.

He wasn't completely surprised when the glass melted into nothingness, and cold hands grabbed him and pulled him forward. Then blackness descended.

When Mike opened his eyes, he could make out nothing at first. As his eyes became accustomed to the half-light he could see it all, and wished to God that he couldn't.

Sue lay in front of him, wreathed in a cold blue mist. He could feel it leaching the heat from his bones even from where he sat, leaving a crushing ache in its stead. She was screaming, but he couldn't hear a sound. The figure that he had noticed on the edge of things came closer, and reached behind him. When it pulled back, he saw that it had Carole. She looked scared, but she was going with it willingly enough. It had to be Adam, or what was left of him.

The figures that had been leaning over Sue were in front of him now. They were floating, and he could see a look of longing etched on their faces.

Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of the sisters, they were at once the same and totally different from the women in the shop. The shopkeeper had been a dim shadow of the real thing, he saw now. They hung before him, joined somehow, although he wasn't sure exactly how. They seemed to flicker, and yet they appeared solid at the same time, their image changing by the second. They appeared to be no more than thirty, although they had to be far older. They were naked, and they were the most beautiful things he had ever seen. But at the same time, the most terrible.

"What did you think you could do? What could you possibly have hoped to achieve?" They spoke with one voice, and though they didn't move their lips the sound echoed throughout the chamber.

"I want my wife." He hoped he sounded braver than he felt.

"It doesn't matter what you want."

Mike prayed for inspiration. There had to be some chink in their armour, something he could use to get them out of here. He turned in a circle, looking for a way out. There was none, save for the mirror. He ran toward it, ready to fight the wraiths if he had to. They just hovered near him, looking to the sisters. He tried to break the glass, but couldn't. In desperation he grabbed a wraith and threw it at the barrier. It reeled away, screeching in pain, but the mirror remained intact. The wraiths were surrounding him again, although they made no move to stop him. Carole was locked in an embrace with Adam, and he didn't think she even knew where she was. The sisters looked on, smiling at his efforts. He went to Sue and lifted her into his arms, groaning as the cold bit deep. There was nowhere to go. He had no idea how to get her out, and even if he could they were hopelessly outnumbered.

The sisters drifted closer, their expression unreadable. "There is no way out." They sighed, and the wraiths cringed. "This is your home now."

"At least let Sue go. You've got me, let her go."

"We can't, it's too late. Look at her." He stroked her hair away from her face and stared at her, drinking in the features he loved so much. He had to admit she was lost to him. Her eyes were open, but she gave no sign that she could see him. Her breathing was shallow, and she was so pale she was almost translucent.

There was no way out for her. And if she couldn't be released, he didn't want to leave either. They belonged together.

Finally, Mike faced the truth. The sisters had won; he had lost. All he could do was try and salvage something from the situation. He could try and make sure it was quick, at least. He lowered Sue to the floor, then turned and ran for the sisters, intent on killing at least one of them. He never made it. As he got nearer, the air seemed to thicken, until he felt as if he were swimming. It was so cold. He got slower and slower, and finally he was treading what passed for water, and getting nowhere.

"Your devotion to your wife is touching, even to us." Their faces were impassive; he had no way of knowing whether they were mocking him. "You've lost. You're ours. But that doesn't have to be the end." They drifted

closer, waited for his response.

“What?”

“We are not without feeling, whatever it might look like to you. You have fought fiercely to keep your wife; knowing that you cannot beat us.” He hung his head, not wanting them to see his tears. They paused, and he felt the air/water warm slightly. The numbness eased, and his bones started to ache once more. “If we feed from you, you will die. That much is true. But there is another way.” He raised his head again, not daring to hope too much. “We can use you to maintain this, the heart of our being.” Looking around, Mike saw that they had sunk lower, through the floor, into a deep blue lake, of sorts. The sisters were more vital, more *here*.

“This mere is our refuge, and it can be one for you too. Of sorts, anyway. If you and your wife stay here, together, your energy will last for centuries; feeding only us. Not the wraiths, not the simulacra. We are not without heart.”

He groaned, and held her tighter, rocked her in his arms. “Will she know me?”

“Yes. You will be together, and it will be as if you are sharing a dream. That is all we can offer. There is no way back. Even if we would let you go, we could not. Too much of your energy is already gone, you would not survive.”

He looked down at himself, and saw that they were right. He was already fading. He had a terrible choice before him; except it really wasn't a choice at all. To die or to dream. What choice was that?

“Why would you do that?”

“Seldom have we seen such devotion in your kind. Your bond appears to be almost as strong as ours, something we had not thought to see in others. We would not see that bond broken lightly.”

“I can't just leave Carole. I brought her here, to find Adam.” He could see her above them, crying. Adam had her, but he was struggling to maintain his grip. If he agreed, he was signing her death warrant. The sisters drew back, and he heard their voices as they conferred.

“You drive a hard bargain. We are prepared to offer your friend and her partner the same choice.” He nodded, aware that this was the best hope for

all of them.

"Let me tell her?"

"Of course." He felt himself being drawn upwards, towards them. When he reached them, Carole clung to him. Adam hissed, but stayed back. Quickly, he explained. He watched the light die in her eyes, and thought his heart would break when she nodded her consent.

"Adam won't stay like this, Carole. He'll be like us, at least." He felt resigned to it now, just glad he would have Sue back. Carole raised her eyes to his, and he saw the same knowledge in them. She grabbed Adam's hand, and smiled.

"Let's do it." She stepped off into the depths with him, and he was aware of Adam changing back to his natural form. Carole let go of him when they reached the others, and held onto Adam. She buried her head against his chest.

Mike moved back to the sisters. He nodded, once. "Do it."

Then Sue was there, coming closer. Her eyes opened as she realised he was there, he'd found her at last, and she smiled and nestled in to him as he enfolded her in his arms. One last time he stroked her hair back off the face he knew so well, and he whispered: "I'll always love you."

They kissed as they began to sink deeper, and clung to each other as they sank lower, not stopping until they reached the centre of it all. There they remained, frozen in time, locked together.

Dreaming of each other, dreaming the life that might have been.