

## HORROR

# The Looking Glass ☹

By Jennifer Hill

**T**he smell hit Melissa like blackjack.

The air sat stagnated with the unmistakable and eerily oxymoronic hues of wet and dry. There was definitely a mould of some kind growing in here—it was entirely possible. The cabin her sister had been staying in, the cabin in which Melissa now stood, was absolute chaos. An easy chair lay knocked over in the corner of the main room with a capsized sofa beside it. Her sister Allie's unfinished novel—the one she had rented this cabin to come out and finish—was strewn all over the floor in a landslide of stationery. Several pages had fallen into the still-roaring fireplace and lay half-burned on the hearth. The mouldy air was thick with smoke as well, and under that something else, something she hadn't smelled in . . . .

It was at this precise moment that she noticed the mirror. At first, she didn't recognize it as a mirror at all; she could see right through it. The frame, however, was definitely the sort of thing that should have been holding a tool of vanity. It was large, oval, and gilded with elaborate carvings of aggressive-looking creatures that might have been dragons—she wasn't sure. When she looked into its glass surface, she could see straight through to the other side. Well, almost. She could *also* see herself clearly reflected in its surface. Melissa checked to see if any there was any light to provide a glare, but there was none. The nearest source of light was coming from one of the bedrooms on the far side of the tiny cabin. There she was, nevertheless, staring back at herself. Besides herself, she couldn't make out anything else.

*It's as if it only wants to see me.*

The thought came to her involuntarily, and she put it aside with some effort. She needed to find Allie. She'd missed Allie's call, but the

message on the machine suggested disaster. The cabin in shambles only confirmed this in Melissa's mind. Allie had sounded panicked, and frightened in her message, and kept insisting that neither of them could trust their father. It was the kind of message that Melissa would have dismissed as bad blood, if it had not been for the unmistakable quiver of fear in her sister's voice. Allie and their father had been on bad terms since their mother had passed two years ago. During their mother's decline, their father had grown distant, and Allie had taken it as indifference. Melissa saw it differently. In her mind, he simply couldn't deal with mortality: not his own, nor that of his wife. Regardless of Melissa's feelings, the bitterness Allie harbored continued to bloom, until she no longer spoke to Dad at all.

*Nice way to treat your only remaining parent after his life-partner dies. Another involuntary thought. I wonder if there's a place in Hell reserved for children who desert their parents?* She hated the bitter resentment at the core of her thoughts. Melissa didn't feel this way most of the time about her sister, and she'd *never* say these things out loud to Allie. But sometimes, the thoughts just came—like epileptic fits. *If you could only hear me now, Sis. I wonder what you'd think.*

The explosive crash, and subsequent tinkle of shattering glass snapped her from her thoughts. It had come from the bedroom.

"Allie?" Melissa called. Icy tendrils of fear snaked their way into her chest. Her eyes darted around the room searching for a weapon in case the sound turned out not to be her sister. The fire-poker, maybe? She looked to the hearth and noticed the poker was missing. Now, an invisible hand reached into her chest, wrapped its icicle fingers around her solar plexus, and squeezed undiluted fear into her being. She settled for the ash shovel instead, resigning herself to the inferior weapon.

Melissa crept up to the bedroom, the tiny shovel raised over her shoulder, ready to strike.

“Whoever’s in there, you’d better be my sister!” she shouted at the bedroom door. For a moment, all she heard was the fireplace. Then she heard a shuffle. Another sound followed. A very weak voice.

“Mel,” it croaked. Melissa recognized Allie’s voice immediately. She burst through the door and saw an image that would remain with her until her final moments on earth.

Allie lay sprawled just out of reach of the doorway. Their father lay at the foot of the tiny twin bed, tucked into the corner of the room. Melissa now knew what the smell she’d been unable to identify had been. It was blood. It was everywhere. Spattered on the sheets of the bed, on Allie’s face (not on their father’s face, however, since his face no longer existed), soaked into the wooden floorboards, slathered on the painting of Abraham Lincoln that hung on the wall. Allie’s midsection was a cavity of gore. Her intestines had fallen out somewhere in the middle of the room. She’d tried to drag herself outside, and had clearly made it as far as the doorway. A shotgun, the likely source of both Allie’s disembowelment, and their father’s missing face, lay in the center of the room with what remained of Allie’s large intestine.

A sound escaped Melissa’s mouth. Perhaps it was a scream. It felt like it could have been. It could also have been a wail. She would later wonder if writers had a word for the sound that ripped itself from her diaphragm. It was primal. It was a part of her she didn’t know existed and it sprang forth, as involuntarily as her previous resentful thoughts.

She tried a lot of things after that. She tried to call 9-1-1 but only half-succeeded. It took her over three minutes to blurt out the address of the cabin, and she was fairly certain that any other sounds she’d made, intended to be words, had come out only as anguished vowels. She tried to cradle her sister’s head in her hands, but Allie cried out almost immediately, making Melissa recoil with the simultaneous shock, and guilt. She tried to calm herself with slow breathing

—*in through the nose (ffff)*—  
—*out through the mouth (sssssss)*—  
—*in through (ffff)*—  
—*the nose (sssss)*—  
—*out (ff-ffff)*—  
—*through (ss-ss-sss)*—  
—*the (f-f-f-ffff)*—  
—*mouth (s-s-ss)*—

before dissolving back into grief-drenched syllables. In the end, the only thing she managed to do, without fail, was wail out one word:

“*Why?*”

Allie also tried. In her case, it was only one thing she was trying to do (answer her sister’s plea), but she had a similar level of success. Her impediment was not grief: it was her missing diaphragm. She summoned all of her might to force her lungs to operate her vocal cords. All she could manage was, “The mirror!”

“The mirror?” Melissa blurted. “What about it?”

“It did it! It showed me . . . .” Allie’s lungs lost their strength after that, and all she could do was look into the mirror’s selectively reflective surface and point.

Melissa (for a moment forgetting her sister’s mortal wounds) began to spout off about how crazy Allie sounded, and she would have gotten further than the beginning of a tirade of disbelief and reality-checks, if she hadn’t chosen that moment to look into the mirror’s surface.

Instead, she began, “A *mirror* can’t blow someone’s head off with a fucking shotgun, Allie! A mirror can’t kill our dad! A mi—” and then she looked into the reflection, meeting Allie’s pleading eyes.

An electric sensation shot through her nerves, and she let out

a howl of physical agony. It was as if her stomach had been ripped open. The pain was paralytic in its intensity, and it wasn't the only thing she felt in that instant.

In that moment, Melissa no longer needed to know why. She knew why.

No. Wrong.

Not *knew*.

She *remembered*.

Wait, again, wrong.

*Allie* remembered.

Melissa was *feeling* Allie remembering.

She remembered coming to the cabin at the beginning of the summer months. Remembered toiling over pages and pages of a novel that refused to emerge. Remembered deciding to clean the cabin up to clear her head. Remembered finding the mirror, thinking it a neat little decoration, before putting it in the main room to even things out. She remembered writing some days, drinking some nights, and crying over her mother on others. Sometimes, she remembered, those days and nights were often the same. She remembered a lot of torn pages, a lot of hangovers, and eventually, she remembered thinking about their father. Remembered feeling immense shame at blaming him for his own personal way of grieving. Remembered thinking it would be good to invite him up to the cabin to talk things out. Remembered dialing, hearing the click of the phone being answered, waiting a lifetime before hearing their father's voice asking who was there. Remembered the rush of sorrow that came with hearing his voice. Remembered inviting him to the cabin. Remembered him arriving, and making uncomfortable small talk about how he liked what she'd done to the place before asking where she got the mirror from.

She remembered being about to respond that she'd found it in

the closet, when she turned to look into its surface, and saw the eyes of their father staring back at them in its surface, and feeling a new kind of sorrow.

His sorrow.

And his shame.

Both Melissa and Allie knew the second they felt the sensation that it was a distinctly masculine kind of shame. The kind of shame that comes with a tingling sensation in the groin. Both Melissa and Allie felt this, because in the instant that their father looked into the mirror, he was trying to force an image from his head that truly disturbed him. It was an image of his daughter, Melissa, stark naked before his eyes. He remembered feeling revulsion that a part of him was excited by what he was thinking, and immediately after, he would have chastised himself for being a sick fuck. But instead, he'd looked in the mirror at the same time as Allie, and instantly, they'd both known what he'd been thinking up until that moment.

Melissa did not remember grabbing the shotgun from the dresser drawer, because Allie did not remember grabbing the shotgun from the dresser drawer, but they did remember that it had happened. They vaguely remembered the shouting, and the screaming that followed. They vaguely remembered the scuffle, but the next thing they clearly remember is the first blast of the shotgun, tearing open Allie's abdomen. They remembered thinking it had gone off by accident (or had it?). They remembered Allie firing a shell into their father's face without an instant's hesitation, before crumpling down into the middle of the floor on top of her own entrails.

They remembered trying to crawl to the main room to dial for help, and thinking only to call Melissa, instead of 9-1-1. They remembered—

Melissa's remembering of her sister's remembering suddenly bled away, and was replaced with a duller agony—one that dissolved into black nothing.

As quickly as it had dissolved, she was back with her own mind. Her own body. Her own thoughts. Her own memories. Her own reasons for misery.

In the end, it was a thought that did it.

A single thought—a very *brief* single thought, at that.

But what a thought it was. The kind of thought that changes the whole way you see a person. That thing that, if you know it's in someone's mind, you wonder how well you *truly* know them. And who knows if this one thought was truly a brief moment of internal darkness that exists, in one form or another, in every human being. Perhaps it was, and their father would have never had another depraved image like that cross his mind again. Perhaps the opposite was true, and he was the most hideous of sexual predators waiting to strike. Allie had not seen into him long enough to truly know the answers to this, and because of this, neither did Melissa.

But they'd both felt the thought.

This is what caused—what *really* spilled blood at the cabin. It wasn't alcohol, or bad blood, or any of the other theories the papers later reported on. There *was* alcohol. There *was* blood, and it *was* bad. But those things didn't *cause* what happened. They merely exacerbated something that had been there for a while.

In the end, it was just one thought.

One thought, reflected in a mirror.