

## The Man in the Mirror

“Funny place, this,” the man said, placing his valise on the bed.

“I think it’s intriguing,” said his wife. She checked her reflection in the mirror and smoothed her dress out.

“Didn’t like the way that fellow downstairs looked at you. And here, look—” He wiped a finger along the bureau. “No one’s dusted in here in ages. What’s a hotel without a proper maid?”

He was getting in one of his grumps, and she knew the best way out was to gently tease him and change the subject. “You could find fault with anything. It’s perfectly lovely. Look at the brass-work by the ceiling; it’s so modern.”

“What are those holes in the brass, then?” He reached up and stuck his little finger in one. “I can’t feel where it ends! What on Earth is it for?”

“It’s probably to allow for the passage of cool air. All the new hotels have them.”

“Passage of vermin, more like. Won’t need any cool air, anyhow. The storm’s taken care of that, that’s for sure.”

He walked over to the window and looked out to see the rain turning the road outside to mud. Cabmen whipped their horses, rushing to get back to the comfort of their stables.

“Tomorrow we’ll find a new hotel. I don’t like it here. Even the mirror’s wrong.”

“Oh, come now, the *mirror’s* wrong?”

“Yes, it’s placed wrong.”

“Nonsense, from there it reflects the whole room.”

“I don’t want it to reflect the whole room. I want it by the basin so I can see myself as I wash up. I’m going to move it.”

She rolled her eyes as he squatted down to lift the mirror, which was taller than him.

“Hang on a minute. It’s fixed to the wall. I can’t get my fingers around it.”

“Probably to keep people like you from moving it about.”

“Well, it’s still wrong,” he said peevishly.

It was just barely nightfall, but they’d both had supper and the weather was far too hellish even to think about going outside, so they stayed in and conversed. They sat together on the bed and talked a few minutes about their plans for the Fair tomorrow, and it was only when lightning struck outside that the woman screamed, her voice masked by the thunder.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked.

She stared into the corner. “There was a man there.”

“Where?”

“I don’t want to point. I think he’s watching us.”

“For God’s sake, where?”

“In the corner. In the mirror.”

He laughed. “A man in the mirror? You don’t think it was me you saw? After all, I am a man, and that *is* a mirror.”

“It was *not* you. You’re sitting here next to me. But him, he was standing.”

The woman’s eyes hadn’t left the mirror. Her husband faced her, and he realized that his back was to the corner. Though it was just his imagination, he thought he felt a pair of eyes sweeping over his body. The hairs on his neck tingled electrically.

“Just wait,” she whispered. “Until the lightning hits. Then you’ll see him.”

Taking slow, deep breaths, he turned in place on the bed and faced the mirror. Her hand sought out his on the quilt.

They didn't have long to wait. Seconds later another bolt hit home in the distance, revealing the black silhouette of a man in the mirror. They couldn't see his face, but could tell he was staring right at them. He was taller, more slender than the husband. And his hands were pressed against the glass, reaching toward them.

The husband's heart thrilled in terror, but he leapt to his feet and shouted, "We see you, you bastard!"

But the flash of lightning was gone. It was an ordinary mirror again, and in it the man could see only his own ashen face. His wife made hysterical, strangled-sounding gasps. He grabbed his cane and rushed to the door, hoping to go next door and beat the watcher to death. But the knob wouldn't turn. He struggled mightily with it, wrenching it this way and that and only when he was gasping for breath did his heart sink as he realized they were trapped.

He stared at the door, trying to think of a way out, when she said quietly: "Roger."

"Yes?"

"I want you to turn the lamp all the way down."

"Whatever for?"

"In the light, he can see us."

The lamp was over on the windowsill. To get to it, he would have to walk past the mirror. He took slow, deliberate steps, pointedly not looking at the mirror. When he was almost clear of it, with just his back passing in front of it, lightning struck again. His wife screamed, and Roger spun to see the man staring directly into his eyes. Then the flash was over, and all Roger saw was his own reflection again.

With a small leap, he made it to the lamp, and turned it all the way down, hurriedly lowering the blinds so that their room was pitch dark.

Roger made his way back to the bed in the darkness, felt for his wife's hand. Now that their room was pitch black, the man in the mirror re-appeared, lit ghostly from behind by a small window in whatever secret room he was in. Roger and his wife stared at the mirror, where the man's hands were cupped around his eyes and pressed against the glass. Roger thought he could see the man's lips move: *I see you*. The man reached his hand out beyond the scope of the mirror (now a window), and they heard a faint squeaking sound.

"Do you hear that?" he asked.

"The squeaking? It's stopped."

"No, not that, it's lower. More like a hiss. Stay here, I'm going to open the window and call for help." He stood, though he suddenly felt unsteady on his feet.

"Roger, I—"

But there was no more talking after that. They could only cough and gasp as they struggled to breathe. They weakened, and she slid off the bed as Roger fell to the floor. They clutched at their throats, and the last thing they saw was the man in the mirror, clapping his hands in delight.