

The Mirror

A Short Story

By

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It was unseasonably warm for April. Even though he had the air conditioner on, Sam still had his driver's side window down as low as it would go. He enjoyed the mix of cool air blowing on his chest and left arm where the persistent sun streaming through the window warmed his clothing. His white shirt and navy slacks were rumpled from the long drive. He'd been on the road almost four hours since his last stop to gas up in East St. Louis, Illinois. He promised himself wouldn't stop again until he reached Chicago. Sam didn't mind the ride. The constant vibration of his tire hitting pavement was calming. He never touched the dials of the radio, riding with only his thoughts. He needed these moments of silent nothingness especially after the work he'd just finished in Pine Bluff.

He eased his unassuming beige Toyota to ten miles below the speed limit to take a good look at the neighborhood around him. Finally settling on the decision to park he eased into a parallel park and cut the engine. He watched the bank in front of him as he methodically twirled a phone in his hands. He watched as people moved in and out of the bank until he spotted the woman he was looking for. She pulled up in a boxy, luxury SUV and doubled parked it on an awkward slant on the side of the building. She did all this while holding a cell phone to her ear occasionally swapping it from her shoulder to her hand. She had a very youthful face although he could tell she was older than she appeared. She laughed loudly with a wide smile

as she exited the truck, so distracted by her conversation that she didn't see the car she stepped in front of as she readjusted the designer handbag on her arm.

Sam clicked off his seatbelt and reached into his backseat to grab an artfully wrapped gift with thick gold ribbon carefully wrapped around it. He looked it over briefly and exited his car as well. He put on his suit jacket making sure that even though his clothes were travel worn, he still looked put together. The woman entered the bank just as he reached the hood of his car. He leaned on it and pretended to be texting on his phone. After a few moments he began to stroll slowly to the bank waiting to see her on her way out through the glass doors.

When Sam saw her approaching, he quickly pressed his phone to his ear and began to project his booming voice,

"I told you I would make it Mom. You've got to have a little more faith in me." He spoke with a smile giving his already handsome face even more appeal.

"I found her the perfect gift! I can't wait to give it to her. This has been the longest trip but it was worth it." He continued loud enough for the woman to hear as she exited the bank. As she passed him, he deliberately moved slightly into her shoulder causing an impact between them that was rough enough to jar them both. Sam fumbled the package out of his hands, and it tumbled to the concrete sidewalk with a conclusive crunch of glass. The woman whipped around at the sound and pressed her phone to her mouth covering the shock that was clear in her eyes.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry." She blurted out. She stooped to touch the now crumpled gift but seemed to rethink the motion halfway through. She pulled her hand back and stood up apologizing again.

“Mom I’m going to call you back. You won’t believe this, Ruby’s gift just broke on the street.” Sam said to no one on the other end of his phone. He made sure his expression appeared disappointed but not angry or intimidating.

“This is just terrible.” He said quietly and rubbed his hands over his eyes.

“I feel just horrible, sir. I didn’t even see you.” The woman said her tone was becoming more frantic in the near absence of a reaction from Sam.

“It was for my little sister. I’m on my way to her birthday party what am I going to do now.” He let sadness creep over his face and looked her straight in the eyes for the first time.

“What was inside? If you don’t mind me asking” She asked him

“It was a snow globe. She loves snow globes.” Sam told her.

The woman looked around at the people moving around on the street around them like she expected someone to appear with a broom and a neatly wrapped snow globe to replace the one she’d broken.

“I’ve been in Australia, and I found her one with kangaroos in it.” Sam told her looking back down at the wounded present. The woman reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet.

“No, I couldn’t.” Sam protested holding up a hand to her wallet blocking her from giving him anything from inside.

“Nonsense,” She protested. “There is no way I’m going to let a little girl’s birthday be ruined because I didn’t have the common decency to watch where I was going.”

She pulled out four twenty-dollar bills and pushed them into his hands.

“Please take this. If you don’t, I’m never going to forgive myself.” She begged when he declined again. She kept pushing and he finally took the money into his hands.

“Thank you, Miss. There aren’t many people still around with your kind of integrity.” Sam replied finally clenching his hand around the money. The lady placed her other hand on top of his holding his fist and the money.

“Wish her a very happy birthday for me and again I’m terribly sorry.” Sam nodded obediently. She released his hands and headed to her truck without looking back.

Sam looked down at the ruined present, satisfied. With the wrapping included the entire present, that actually had a cheap drinking glass wrapped inside, cost him about 4 dollars. He snagged the materials at the dollar store before he’d left Arkansas. Knowing there would be some time before he could access the money he’d just secured; he bought enough material for three decoy presents to earn him a little cash in the meantime. He counted the \$80 dollars the woman had shoved in his hand. A \$76 profit wasn’t too bad.

After slipping into the bank to exchange the twenties into smaller bills, Sam spotted two diners on opposite corners of the street. Both had the telltale signs of a greasy spoon with Formica countertops visible through the windows and plenty of signs promoting the prices of their dishes. The windows seemed to be in a silent screaming match with one another, begging passersby to stop in to try their blue plate special over the other eatery. Sam chose the one that seemed the busiest.

The atmosphere inside the restaurant was a sensory overload. Overwhelming scents of frying butter, grease and meats rushed up to meet Sam as he entered the door, eager to invade new nostrils. The smell of eggs and steaks propelled his stomach forward. Although the tables

and chairs were outdated, dull colors of olive, butterscotch and tan they shone with the brightness of diligent care and cleaning. They created a vivid glowing effect in the sun pouring through the windows. Most of the tables were full and the hum of conversations spiked in volume randomly from all different points around him. A short waitress with sleepy eyes and purple hair threw a hand on her hip in front of him and rolled her eyes as she pointed to a sign that read:

Please Seat Yourself.

Sam smiled at her pleasantly, and she rolled her eyes again stalking away in the other direction. She looked to be about nineteen or twenty and her facial piercings and rebelliously excessive collection of colorful jewelry stood out like a beacon. Sam noticed a woman put her hand up trying to get the waitress' attention, and she stalked right by her without even slowing.

He headed in the other direction past a group of frat boys nursing hangovers and a middle-aged couple who were both staring at their phones. Another waitress flitted around this section with all the grace of a remote-controlled car being operated by a toddler. She rushed back and forth so rapidly from the pass to the tables with food it was almost like she was slamming herself in each direction. She had an effortless pleasant smile, and she left a bit of it with every plate she served up, leaving the customers smiling or laughing as she whisked away.

Sam chose a two-seater table and slid into the cool, slick chair. He looked at the menu absentmindedly, but his nose had decided at the door that he would be having a steak and egg breakfast. The turbo powered waitress whooshed over to him with a smile and greeted him. The bright red t-shirt she wore was respectably snug, and she still tugged at it as she spoke.

White block letters on the front read, "Benny's Diner" with the address and phone number printed underneath.

"Why do you think they print the address on your uniforms? If we're looking at it we're already here." He asked her. Amused confusion covered her pecan face as she thought.

"I don't know, but I guess you're right. Never thought about." She finally said briefly looking down at her shirt and shrugged." She had a stretched-out Midwest pace to her words.

"How's the T-Bone?" He asked her.

"It's pretty good, I like it." She replied genuinely. And her eyes twinkled although her perma-smile stayed the same.

"Okay let me have that, eggs and a couple pancakes." He told her and snapped the menu shut. She scribbled on her order pad and rapped lightly on the table twice before she zoomed away to the pass to pick up plates. At the table next to Sam, a mother and her two young sons sat talking loudly. The children had pancakes piled high with whipped cream and chocolate chips. The boy closest to Sam was taking shallow scoops of it, being careful to avoid the pancake underneath. The mother smiled when their eyes met, and Sam bowed his head a little to her. She sat in front of a modest breakfast of a hard-boiled egg and tea. The mother smiled serenely at the boys adding a softly spoken word here and there as they bickered, laughed and conspired as little boys do. He watched them for a moment too long giving a false nostalgia the opportunity to creep in and then before he knew it memories of his past began to creep up his back like spiders leaving him anxious and afraid.

Sam redirected his attention to the perky waitress who had now begun taking orders and requests from the purple haired girl's section. She was a more soothing sight. She had a

lion's share of obsidian coils tied up in a thick puff of a ponytail at the top of her head. A few of the curls had escaped near her ear and she swiped at it over and over as she moved. His order came up and she walked it over with a smile.

"Can I get you anything else? How about some orange juice?" She asked as she set the steaming plate before him.

"How about the manager so I can tell he or she that you should get her tips." He said pointing over at the other waitress with a steak knife. Purple hair was leaning against the wall typing furiously on her phone. His curly haired waitress' smile didn't falter but her eyes squinted a little letting some of her annoyance show.

"That's not necessary sir. It's alright. I'd be no better than her if I just stood around watching her tables not get served." She told him.

"You smile a lot." He told her like he had just that second made the revelation. Her giggle made her eyes twinkle.

"I guess I do. That means I'm in the right job." She told him.

"Or you could be better as a beauty queen. They have to smile a lot." He told her and put on his most charming smile. She snapped her fingers in disappointment and replied sarcastically,

"Damn I wish I had of thought of that. But I'm working here now so..." She let out a tinkling giggle.

"Let me know if you need anything, enjoy!" She raced away with her speedy pace and Sam set about his meal.

When he made it to the counter with his check to pay, the purple haired waitress had resulting to sitting at one of the empty tables. She was still typing out texts or Tweets or whatever the new form of non-communication was popular these days. His pretty waitress zoomed up and took his check to ring it up.

“Okay 12.57 is your total.” She sighed out apparently enjoying a task that left her standing still. Sam pulled out a ten and five-dollar bill and handed them to her. She took them and put them in the register and gave him 2.43 cents back. He purposefully didn’t look at his hand and smiled at her. She held his gaze transmitting more than just excellent customer service. He knew how to use his dark eyes to his advantage, it was part of the reason he was good at what he did.

“I like that you smile a lot. Don’t stop.” He told her, lowering his voice like they were sharing a secret.

“I won’t.” She said with a flirtatious wink.

Sam looked down at his change.

“Darling you only gave me two dollars back I gave you twenty.” He told her sweetly.

“Oh, I’m sorry I could have sworn it was fifteen, are you sure?” She said looking down at the now closed register puzzled.

“You’re beautiful enough to distract me, but no I’m sure it was twenty, I just left the bank.” Sam told her. She used a key she produced from under the counter with a Welcome to Las Vegas key chain and turned it in the register to get it back open.

“Tell you what. I need a solid ten anyways, so I’m going to give you another dollar and you just give me ten back, cool?” He asked her.

“Yeah that’s cool. I’m sorry it’s so busy in here I can hardly remember my own name.”

She pulled out a ten and handed it to him. He slid the ten out of her hand slower than necessary and asked,

“And what is your name?” He pressed.

“Crystal” She told him.

“Crystal” He repeated with a smile. “Thank you for the pleasant dining experience, Crystal.” He said exaggerating his formal speech. She giggled again and said,

“Come back and see us soon, okay?” The us in her statement didn’t match her expression, the look on her face said come back and see me.

“I’ll do that.” Sam said and strolled out of the restaurant.

Out on the street Sam decided to take a walk in the sun. He had nothing better to do than sit on ice in Chicago until his funds were available, then he could make plans. He made sure never to count money until it was in his hands. He had a couple of credit cards he’d gotten from a friend who made his living printing credit cards with fake names and real accounts. That would insure he could get a nice room to relax in for a while.

He rounded a corner and found himself flanked with two rows of commercial stone buildings with sublevel shops and a few stone steps leading down to each one. He passed a couple art galleries and a closeted looking bookstore. He paused a moment to look at the display in the window featuring books about gangsters like Al Capone and John Dillinger. A feather boa was loosely woven around the books on display and a plastic Tommy Gun was balanced on a stack of books with “Hoffa” in red letters on the spine.

In a foster home he lived in when he was about 12, Sam was placed with a kid his age who was obsessed with the prohibition gangsters. That's all the he would ever talk about was Baby Face Nelson and Ma Barker. His father had come home one night and decided to beat the shit out of the kid, and he arrived at the foster home in a wheelchair and casts on both legs. Sam felt a little sorry for him, so he listened to the stories learning far more about the roaring twenties and thirties than he wanted too. Looking at the display made Sam wonder how the boy turned out, but he never cared enough to try and reach out to anyone from his childhood. Over thirty-seven foster care placements in four years taught Sam to not hang on to people because in his life they passed like clouds.

A resale shop a couple doors down from the bookstore caught his eye. The store front appeared to be significantly narrower than the others giving the impression that the masons who laid the brick for stores built that one as an afterthought. On closer inspection he saw that the store had no name displayed only a large wooden sign with the word "Thrift" painted in dark green letters. He wanted to go inside, but he had no idea why. He wasn't exactly a weekend warrior looking for an antique treasure or a new restoration project, but something about the store called him inside. He descended the steps and pushed open the heavy door that chimed his arrival.

An ancient woman sat at the counter staring off into space. She didn't react to the chime; she didn't move at all. Her eyes looked to be clouded with cataracts or some other obstruction and Sam wasn't sure she could see.

"Hello." He said tentatively even though he was standing in full view he felt as if he may frighten her. She shifted just a bit as if she was aware that she needed to move or people would

think she was dead. She still didn't speak, but the movement was enough for Sam to know that she heard him.

"I'm just going to look around." He twirled his finger pointing around the store.

The woman didn't protest, so he continued deeper into the shop passing her unflinching at her post. Her shoulders were thick with shawls and scarves. There had to be at least twenty of them all different colors and patterns. They were worn and frayed like she had been wearing them for a very long time.

Skyscrapers of fostered possessions towered over him as he carefully passed through the aisles making sure not to brush anything with his shoulders. At the end of one aisle someone had set up a silver tea set on a shelf in a bureau that was missing a door. He stopped to pick up the tea pot realizing instantly it wasn't real silver, but maybe silver plated over alloy or stainless steel. He turned the pot over in his hand touching an intricate embossing of a peacock on the belly.

Sam replaced the tea pot where it belonged and started to move past it watching his distorted reflection in the teacups balloon and shrink as he passed. If the set had been real, he would have snatched it up and proclaimed this to be his lucky day. He'd coincidentally just found out how much a good silver tea set can be worth as he had painstakingly sat for hours listening to Ms. Bonnie Rae brag about one of hers that cost twenty-one thousand dollars.

Ms. Bonnie Rae had been his last target. He'd come to Pine Bluff specifically for her after he'd learned about her background. Seventy-two years young and the daughter of oil tycoons that spanned back to Lincoln's presidency. She never married, "I'm a bachelorette, honey" she'd told him during their first dinner together in the restaurant where they met on an

accident strategically orchestrated by Sam. She had children, but they were all scattered across the globe leaving Ms. Bonnie Rae to fend for herself as the reigning queen of the Pine Bluff elite social scene.

After a few phone conversations and a couple more dinners Sam had finally been invited into Ms. Bonnie Rae's home where he met the infamous tea set. He pretended to be distraught that evening ruining Ms. Bonnie Rae's attempts to move their newfound relationship out of the friend zone. After some prodding, he explained that he was embarrassed to tell her that his investment partner had fell through on his promise to match his seed money contribution. He went on to tell her that he didn't want to confess all this because the company he and his partner was buying produced adult films. He assured her that he wouldn't have been involved with the productions, he would just be a silent partner collecting profits. Sam proclaimed his growing infatuation with Ms. Bonnie Rae saying he was worried that if she found out the kind of business he was trying to buy; she wouldn't want him anymore.

Ms. Bonnie Rae assured Sam that she was more comfortable than he thought with his new business venture. After a couple more weeks and some superb acting by Sam, Ms. Bonnie Rae offered to front Sam the thirty-three thousand his imaginary friend still hadn't put up and add an extra twenty thousand of her own money to be invested as well. Ms. Bonnie Rae was the perfect mark, she was fiercely independent and concerned about her social status. He knew she wouldn't want her community and her family to know she got taken for fifty-three thousand dollars trying to invest in the sex trade all while romancing a young Black man almost forty years younger than her. She probably wouldn't even contact the police. Ms. Bonnie Rae would nurse her hurt feelings and never trust anyone again.

Sam knew the heartbreak would sting more than the money. That was the skill of the job. He could have taken her for everything she had but being greedy is for amateurs. The higher the amount, the more likely the mark would go to the police. Ms. Bonnie Rae could certainly stand to miss fifty thousand, but a higher amount would have left her with no choice but to alert the authorities. She wasn't thinking about getting the money back though, that was the beauty of the broken heart. Right now, he knew she was going over everything that was said between them and trying to figure out how she missed the warning signs. She was surely trying to piece together which of his words were truth and which were lies.

Sam kept slowly browsing through the store, enjoying the strange feeling of walking around in someone's past. Rounding a corner, he stopped in his tracks at the most peculiar sight of at least fifty full length mirrors all leaning on each other in a slanted row. Each was unique in age and style, ranging from antique to modern. He walked over pausing in front of one that had been pulled free of the formation and propped against a shelf of knickknacks. He paused and admired his reflection in the mirror running a hand over his chiseled jaw and thick brooding eyebrows. He flashed a killer smile at the mirror and posed a bit before continuing to inspect the rest. Mesmerized with the collection of mirrors, he began to pull each one from its place and propped it up so he could see himself surrounded by each unique frame.

With his vanity at its peak, he pulled out an oval mirror surrounded with a filigree of aged, coarse iron. The design was twisted into what Sam thought looking a little like a dagger with its tip pointing straight down the middle of the mirror. Someone had turned this one around and as Sam struggled with the heavy, awkward shape he almost gave up and left it that

way. He finally freed it from the others and turned it around carefully balancing the weight of it so it didn't crash to the ground.

When Sam saw his reflection in the twisted burdensome mirror he howled and crashed backwards into a column of shelves packed tight with hard cover books. The reflection of him in the mirror, which had now crashed into a shelf of books as well, was flayed and raw. The skin was slashed and grated stained red with wounds just stale enough for the pain really to set in. The face was twisted and distorted with a gash that should have been a mouth slashed so deep in the corner the opening stretched down to the chin. The limbs were withered and buckled making the figure appear distorted like a faulty video feed. It stood as Sam stood putting its hand over the gash in its face as Sam clamped his hand over his mouth. Moving closer to the mirror, Sam and the mangled figure moved closer to each other.

When he got as near to the thing as he could bear Sam finally looked into the things eyes which were so strikingly human-like and free of damage against the contrast of the rest of its maimed body. He felt a jerk behind his navel, the swirling feeling of a roller coaster ride in his stomach and then the store around him disappeared in a blanket of impenetrable black. Stretching his arms out in panic Sam screamed out for help. The racing pattern of his heart throbbed in his ears making them burn hot.

At once the floor beneath him gave out and he began falling so fast the air rushing by him stung his eyes until they began to water. The darkness all around him broke into a vertical tube of hundreds of moving images. At first, they raced past him so fast he couldn't process them and then he began to see patterns of some videos repeating to the left and right of him. All of the images were of him. He was watching himself do terrible things to unsuspecting

people. Images of all of his cons surrounded him replaying over and over again. He saw foster homes one after another where he stole things, destroyed whatever he could find, and terrorized other kids. He saw the dismal trail that his miserable life had left behind and the images repeated until he thought he would be sick at the mere sight of his own face.

His feet slammed into solid floor, but he somehow stayed vertical. The darkness disappeared and the store around him appeared to be untouched by the terrifyingly bizarre event taking place. The twisted reflection was pointing at him now staring at him with those lidless magnetic eyeballs. Sam scrambled away from the mirror bumping into all the things he'd been so careful to avoid on his way in. He ran, frantically twisting and turning through shelves trying to find the front of the store. When he finally sprinted up an aisle that led him out in front of the old woman at the counter, he noticed that she still had not moved but now she was smiling a nearly toothless grin. She did not speak or move in acknowledgment of the manic man who had just burst from the back of her store. Sam wrenched open the door and dashed out of the store gulping fresh air. He'd made it up to the street when he dropped to his knees vomiting and crying not caring who could see him.

The images of him flashed in his mind, they were programmed there now. He couldn't stop seeing all the horrible things he'd done replaying on a loop making him even more nauseated. His breath was labored as he stood, and he stumbled away from the thrift store with his vision blurred by tears. The images overwhelmed him again when he made it to the end of the block and he pressed his back against the cold, rough concrete side of the building standing there. He crouched down wrapping shaky arms around his knees and took a few calming breaths.

Every time he blinked the ominous, deformed creature was there pointing at him, not in warning, in accusation. The images he'd been assaulted with weren't an omen of what's to come, they were an uninhibited view of what he truly was. The image of him, flayed and scarred until it was unrecognizable, he knew that was what he was inside. The handsome, persuasive man he usually saw in the mirror was the illusion. If people could see him for what he really was, they would know to avoid him at all costs, but his sheep's costume cloaked his wolf-like nature.

There are moments in life when you reach a pivotal point that could change the course of your future with a simple decision. Should I take the job? Should I date this person? Should I move to another town? Most of the time these monumental decisions seem to pale in comparison to the impact they will have on our lives. And many times, they pass us by unnoticed until in hindsight we look back in either remorse or joy. This was Sam's moment, this was his monumental decision to continue on being Sam "Slick" Canan, or he could change.

Gathering what was left of his sanity and self-awareness. Sam rose again, a bit steadier this time. When he looked down at his legs and feet, for a whisper of a second, he saw them covered in the raw flogged skin of the image of him in the mirror. He shook his head to clear away the hallucination and headed back in the direction of the diner. As he neared the sale posters decorated windows of the restaurant, he looked up and made startling eye contact with Crystal who was standing next to a table of construction workers. She smiled down at them, leaving them with a few words, and then very deliberately headed straight towards the door. She tried to push it open hard, but the strength of her arms was no match for the weight of the

door. Her face was twisting into a frown. The alien expression on her naturally cheery face was so offbeat, to Sam it was like the record of reality skipped.

“Liar!” She exclaimed at him pointing a quick accusatory finger at him. Sam took a step back out of her reach.

“You’re a liar and a thief.” She told him, face still curved in a disgusted frown. “Don’t you know I could get fired for my register coming up short?”

She threw her hands on her hips and stood like she was waiting for an answer from him and he stood paralyzed in confusion and shame. After what he’d just witnessed, he had no desire to continue being the man who had wronged this poor woman. He opened his mouth to try to articulate the enormous shift that had occurred in his life in the short time since she had seen him last, but he couldn’t utter a word before she cut him off.

“Never mind, don’t answer that. I want my money because I am not paying for food you ate with the tips I worked hard for.” She put out an expectant palm, fired up and fearless. In her eyes he could see she had no doubt she was getting back the money he stole, immediately.

Still unable to even form a response he fumbled in his pocket for the cash.

“You know what,” she continued, “people like you are the worst. You present yourself as one thing, but you’re really just a snake. You’re just out to get whatever you can take from people who are surviving just like you.” She gave another quick jab in the air in his direction.

“You were so quick to criticize the other waitress in the restaurant, but at least she isn’t deceitful. She has a shitty attitude, but she’s honest.” The swear and her voice mixed into something unsavory in Sam’s ear.

“She’s the same on the inside as she is on the outside.” She said and he snapped his eyes to hers, staring at her with a pained look on his face. He pushed all of the money he’d taken from both of his pockets into her hands. His shook violently as he pulled his back. She looked at them then back at him and asked,

“What is wrong with you? Scared I’m going to call the police?” she cocked her eyebrow up and challenging stare.

It may have been the way that her anger looked so out of place on her, or how all of the people in the restaurant smiled in her presence. It could have been the easy way she spoke or the way she stood up for herself and what was right. Maybe it was the fact that she was the last thing he touched before he crossed the magmatic river of self-discovery and marooned on a decision to change. He wanted her to be the first to know that he wanted to be a better man. He needed her to see how urgent it was for him to change. He needed her to see what was inside him, so she’d understand.

He took her wrist so she couldn’t pull free.

“You let me go right now or I promise I will scream.” She said in a purposely calm voice with a rumble of fear. He looked at her, really looked at her. He looked at her through those horrid eyes of the creature with no lids or lashes to hide behind.

“Please don’t be afraid of me. I’m sorry for what I did to you.” His voice sounded strange to his ears. Maybe this was the first time he’d heard his real voice. Her arm relaxed just a touch in his grip before tensing again.

“What do you want?” She asked pleading a little with the panic winning out in her tone.

“I just would like you to come with me, please. I need to show you something.” He asked her trying to express in those few words how important this was to him without sounding threatening.

She looked back at the restaurant, then took out a phone out of the short black waist apron she wore. She pressed the nine button and the one button twice forcefully and showed him the screen while holding her thumb over the call button.

“You have five minutes, and I am not getting in your car.” She told him and snatched her arm away from him. He backed away with his palms up hoping she took the gesture as his complete disinterest in harming her in any way. He took the lead and guided her quickly around the corner to the thrift store. His quick pace matched his eagerness to show her what he really was and how his actions had destroyed him inside a hundred times greater than they were even worth. She followed him down the stairs and into the ringing door. They both halted in front of the old woman and this time Sam just dipped his head in her direction and took a few steps deeper in the store. She was still smiling that bone, chillingly eerie smile. She turned her eyes to Crystal and said,

“Welcome” Staring in a way that convinced Sam he was correct in thinking the woman was blind.

“Thank you.” Crystal replied in a quiet voice. Sam could feel her fear layering around her like a cushion.

“It’s this way.” He told her, beckoning her forward down the aisles he’d taken to find his fate.

When they made it to the corner of mirrors the iron framed mirror was just as he'd left it balancing on the bottom edge waiting like lady justice, inescapable and merciless.

"Mirrors?" She asked in a whisper, "What kind of lunatic are you?"

"Just look in it." He said grabbing her elbow gently and turning her to face the mirror head on.

At the sight of his reflection's bloody hand touching Crystal, he quickly let her go feeling shame warm his neck and face. Her breath caught in her throat and slipped out in a low whisper before turning into a shrill scream. She pushed him hard and started to make a clumsy stumble back up the aisles.

"What are you?" She screamed over her shoulder at him. He gave chase behind her, taking a moment to realize his pursuit only terrified her more. They both emerged out of the aisles in front of the old woman within seconds of each other.

"The mirror shows you what to avoid, not fear Crystal." The sound of the old woman's voice shocked them both into rigid statues. It was like listening to a century old grave being pried open slowly nail by rickety rusted nail.

"How do you know my name? What is this?" Crystal asked backing toward the door with her eyes darting around the room like a frightened animal cornered by a carnivore.

"I know you, I know him, I know all y'all." She cackled and her laughed dissipated into racking coughs.

"I know what you saw in that mirror, son. I know." She reinforced.

He stepped closer to her. "Is that me?" he asked momentarily forgetting Crystal was there.

“That’s your soul you see reflected back to you.” The woman told him. Her laugh and coughing fit had shaken some of her scarves loose, but she made no move to readjust them.

“That’s what’s inside you while you walk around, living in this body.” She said with a dismissive wave of the hand. She said body with such an unimportant tone you would think bodies were so insignificant that we could change them like shoes.

“You can pretty all this up, and you are pretty, but that what you saw in the mirror is what you really are.” She told him.

“His soul?” Crystal asked suspiciously. Her hand was on the door holding it open just enough to see the bright sunlight illuminating the crack between it and the frame.

“Most people who see the mirror have a dark spot or two. Some are just shadows, but you son, I haven’t seen one as bad as yours in a long time.” The old woman said turning her sightless eyes on Sam.

“Can I fix it?” Sam asked in a whisper, afraid her answer will stamp out all of his hope. The old woman let out another confetti of laughter and hacking coughs.

“Ask her.” She said looking over at Crystal.

“Ask me what? How to fix his soul?” Crystal asked with her face stretched in disbelief.

“Been a long time since I saw one like yours too, honey.” She told Crystal with a knowing tone.

“What does that mean?” Crystal asked with a hint of anxiety rising in her tone.

“Not a spot, not a blemish.” She cackled again, “You two together are like north and south in the same direction.”

Sam and Crystal looked at each other across the distance of the Earth between them. The old woman sat at the equator. In her eyes he could see sympathy, although the rest of her expression told him that she didn't want to show it. She broke their gaze and turned her attention back to the old woman.

"Why does his soul look so wounded?" She asked her, then thinking better of her question before the woman could answer, she asked Sam, "What have you done?"

"Not what he did, *how* he did it. What do you love, son?" The woman asked Sam, putting him on the spot. He didn't even attempt to answer as his mind went blank.

"You can't think of anything can you?" She continued, "That's because you don't love anything do you?" She asked. Not waiting for an answer, she pressed on.

"Love is like protection for your soul. Don't you know that?" She asked like the information was common knowledge like state capitals or ocean names.

"It's in the nature of a human to do things that damage the soul in one way or another, but it's the love we have and the love we are given that protects us from each blow. Your soul has been fighting a war with no weapons and no armor, so it looks exactly as it should."

Sam wanted to contradict her, but try as he might, he couldn't conjure an image in his mind that he related to love.

"You don't even love those cons you pull Slick. Destroying others and at the same time you're destroying yourself." The old woman said and cackled again at his ignorance.

He could feel Crystal staring at the side of his head, but he willed himself not to meet her eyes. She had seen what he was. Being a victim of one of the actions that had led him to his fate, he couldn't allow himself to accept sympathy from her. Even if it was a look of revelation

of the broken thing he was inside his Sam suit. In his peripheral vision he saw her hand drop from the door.

“This one loves everything. You love things that you don’t even know exist, don’t you honey?” She asked Crystal. “That guard you have around you is too thick to penetrate.” She directed her attention back to Sam where he stood wounded and exposed.

“You want to fix your soul? You need to ask her. If someone like her can find any love for you, you might just be able to.” She settled lower in her seat with her scarves still haphazard like melting snow sliding slowly down a mountain.

Her gaze abandoned them both and after a few beats Crystal pulled open the door and walked out. Sam looked at the woman a little longer,

“Did you know I was going to come here.” He asked her still dancing on the fence of disbelief that divides reality and the supernatural.

“I know you needed to.” She replied simply.

Sam crossed in front of her and left the store.

Crystal was waiting for him downwind of where he’d been sick, and he passed it feeling even more shame. When he reached her, she just looked up at him with a bewildered stare and headed back to the diner.

“Right before I came into the restaurant, I conned a woman out of eighty dollars with a quick trick I do with a present and a sad story.” He blurted out. She slowed her pace for a moment then sped back up.

“Three days ago, I left Arkansas with fifty-three thousand dollars that I took from a sweet lady who thought I was in love with her. I trapped her in such an embarrassing situation

to steal the money from her, she will be too ashamed to go to her family or friends for comfort.” He continued quickly.

She whipped around in disgust. Her shoulders even shivered a little like the sight of him repulsed her.

“You are a monster.” She told him plainly.

“But I want to be better. I don’t want to be this thing.” He said clutching the front of his shirt like his twisted soul was waiting just underneath.

“I want to give the money back to the woman in Arkansas, I’ll wait out here every day until I find the woman who paid for the present and give her money back too.

“You think returning money will change the things you did to them to take it?” She asked incredulously.

“No.” Sam said quickly. “But it’s a start.” He pleaded with her eyes, for what, he himself wasn’t entirely sure. Maybe flawed souls, the souls with no hope and no goodness left in them thirst after people with pure souls like hers. Like the dry sandy shore chases after the quenching sea when the tide rushes it backward.

She looked at him again with those twinkling eyes. He waited patiently for her to speak because her gaze gave him no hint to what she was thinking.

“How is it possible to never love anything in your whole life?” she asked him squinting into to his face on a search for the answer.

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought about that until today.” He told her quietly and waited patient for the next question in the interview he hoped to secure him a position in her company.

“How is it possible that no one has ever loved you?” She asked. She twisted her face like she was ashamed of the words she’s spoken.

“I imagine because no one has ever seen the real me. When I’m in their lives, I’m focused on keeping up a lie that will help me get what I want. They fall in love with the romance of the con not me.” He answered truthfully.

“What about your family, your mother?” She implored further. He flinched at the sound of her last word and replied.

“I don’t have any family and my mother didn’t feel anything for me.”

A loud knock on the diner window shook them both to attention. Inside the purple haired girl stood with a hot plate of French fries in her hand that was wafting steam up near her face. She gave Crystal a murderous look before rolling her eyes and continuing to a table that was in Crystal’s section.

“What does that mean? She didn’t feel anything for you?” Crystal asked snapping his attention away from the diner. Her question nudged a box of secrets deep in his mind. He hadn’t ever opened it. Never talked about what was inside. She waited patiently and he noticed she was standing closer to him than before. The sympathy in her eyes was allowed to run free now and she made no effort to stop it. He sighed and brushed the cobwebs off the box of memories he hadn’t opened in thirty years.

“When I was eight my father walked out on us. My mother had just given birth to my twin brothers almost a year before, but he left anyways. I imagine, now, that the rapidly mounting responsibility of a wife and three children got the best of him, but I don’t really know.” He paused and clutched his wrist tightly with his free hand. “I was playing in my room

one evening when she came with my coat in hand and helped me put it on. My brothers were already by the door in snowsuits and car seats waiting for us. She took us all out to the car and snapped the twins in the backseat. She put me in the seat between them then got in and started the car, sitting patiently as the engine warmed.” He shrugged his shoulders a little.

“Up until that moment nothing seemed strange about her. She was always a woman of few words and even less emotion. Silence was normal for her. It wasn’t until she opened the door and closed it leaving us in the car alone did I feel any fear or panic. She closed the garage door with the car running and never came back.”

Crystal’s hand went to her mouth and clamped there.

“The twins slept through the entire thing and there were times after it happened that I was happy for that. I took off my seat belt and got out of the car unable and unaware of the urgent need to take my brothers out too. When I left them in the garage to go out and search for my mother, I didn’t know what would happen. I checked every room and closet in our home, but I never found her. After searching and searching I cried a little and then walked to the neighbor’s house to ask for help finding her. My eight-year-old mind put the priority of finding my mother over my brothers who were being slowly poisoned alone in the car.”

A tear escaped Crystal’s eye, but she was too enthralled in his horrible tale to wipe it away.

“When the neighbors finally asked about my brothers it was too late. Everyone came the police, firefighters, ambulance. All of them left their lights flashing decorating my house in red and blue. They tried to save the babies, who wouldn’t try even if they knew there was no hope?”

He heaved a heavy sigh tasting events on his tongue that he hadn't explored in decades.

Crystal asked softly, "What happened to your mother?"

"My mother wasn't found until about a week later. The director of the group home I'd been placed in, called me into her office to sit me down and break the news. She said my mother had washed out of Lake Shafer, apparent suicide by drowning." Crystal closed her eyes.

"When I think about how she was able to do that. To calmly dress us and leave us to die like that. She couldn't feel anything for me."

Crystal opened her eyes and opened her mouth to speak, but she formed no words. She took his hand and held it tightly between hers for a long moment and let it go.

"I'm sorry for you." She said slowly. "I'm sorry you don't know what it feels like to be loved." She hugged her arms around herself, like the thought of living his way chilled her.

They stood in silence like they were waiting for an epic sign to mark the event when the pure and sullied try to understand one another.

Crystal spoke first,

"I have to go back inside." She told him but she didn't move.

"I understand." He told her mistaking her failure to leave as a sign she wanted some acknowledgment from him.

She made sure he was looking her in the eye when she continued,

"And if you are serious about trying to find the woman you told me about, you can wait for her in the diner whenever you like." She gave him a small, sympathetic smile before heading back into the restaurant.

The thrift store pulled at him like a magnet leaving him with no reason to wonder what he should do next. He headed back in the direction of the place where he'd found a gash in reality. As he approached the store he realized this would be his third time willingly coming back to this place. The first time he entered to experience the truth. The second time he came to understand it, and now he would enter to accept it.

"Did you make the mirror." Sam asked the old woman after the loud chime of the door ceased.

The old woman howled with laughter at his question.

"That mirror is older than anything you can conceive child."

"How long have you had it?" He asked her.

"Since the day I walked into a store just like this one and saw myself for what I really was behind my skin."

Sam wasn't sure why he expected her to say that, but the revelation didn't shock him. She nodded her head.

"We all can sense each other, the flawed and the scarred. We flock together because we know each other even when we don't."

Sam eased himself down into a Victorian style chair with a thread bare green cushion.

"You are with us now Slick." She said sincerely. "When the mirror called me, a man was waiting here for me just like I was here waiting for you. He told me we were the lucky ones. We were given a second chance to get it right. I sat with him for a long time, and he taught me all I needed to know. Just like I will sit with you and teach you."

Sam didn't protest the thought of sitting here with this ancient woman collecting cobwebs. When she said she would sit with him he felt relieved. He felt like he wasn't alone.

"The mirror will call the others here when it is their time to know and as you help them, you will help yourself." She told him. Sam stared around at the purgatory the mirror had created for him and he knew he was in the place where he belonged.

The old woman would not have long to teach him everything he needed to know, but she would complete her task before she left him alone to guard the place where twisted souls came to find the truth.

Sam "Slick" Canan would never pull another con after the day he stumbled upon the mirror. For some time after he'd found the thrift store, he'd spend most of his days finding people from his past and doing what he could to fix his misdeeds. After all of his leads went dry Sam would sit, just as the ancient woman had, waiting for the mirror to silently call drifting souls to shore like a lighthouse of redemption.

And, often when he was done and thrift store was locked up tight, he'd sit in the nearby diner and spend time with the pretty waitress with an easy smile who'd once seen the real person beneath his skin.