

Broken Symmetry

by Angela Brett

Part I

It was not until my twelfth birthday that I realised the face I saw in the mirror was not mine.

I had always assumed it was me — with the long brown hair, hazel eyes, and the line of freckles joining two rosy cheeks. Indeed, that corresponded to the way others hazily described me. The image perfectly mimicked my actions, wore my clothes in the way I imagined they looked on me. I had no reason to doubt that it was my reflection that I could see, as she looked convincingly like photographs of myself.

Ironically, it was my kitten, Angel, who led me to discover what I am sure I was better off not knowing. She was given to me on the birthday which I have mentioned, a cat such a pure white that the name Angel immediately sprang to mind, and stayed there, when I first saw her. The kitten did not seem to have such an angelic temperament, however. As soon as I released her from the box she had been brought to me in, the distressed kitty leapt at my face, giving my cheek a scratch which would have been very painful, had it been caused by a fullgrown cat. Quickly I rushed to the bathroom to inspect the damage in the mirror. I was relieved, though a little puzzled, to see that the scratch had not even marked my face, and went back to my friends in the lounge.

“Ooh, that's a nasty scratch, Hannah — we should put some Savlon on that,” said my mother.

I thought she was joking, and said, “Oh, of course, it probably needs stitches as well!”

“It's not that bad, Hannah, it's just bleeding a little. But we don't want you getting an infection from the cat.”

“But... there isn't even a mark! Don't be silly, Mum.”

“I think you're the one being silly, Hannah. That scratch sticks out like a sore... like a sore cheek. I'll get the Savlon.”

By this time even my friends were beginning to look at me strangely, so I didn't say anything more. Before I went to bed that night I looked in the mirror again, but still no scratch had appeared on the image.

The next day — Sunday — I spent in front of my mirror, examining the image and comparing it to photos. I noticed several subtle differences — her eyes were a slightly different shade, she had a few extra freckles. While I wasn't looking at the mirror my mind was occupied solely with trying to figure out who she was. Did I have a twin who had died at birth, and now watched me through the mirror? My mother assured me that no, I had never had a twin sister, and wondered why I had asked. I dared not tell her.

So who was it? Soon I became very uncomfortable around mirrors — I did not like the thought of her watching me. By the time I was fifteen my thoughts were permanently filled with dread, the awful feeling of being watched. I started to plan shopping trips so that I could pass as few reflective surfaces as possible — my friends thought I was weird, and soon they were not my friends. I was relieved at this — no longer would I have to think of excuses not to go out.

I covered my bedroom mirror with a blanket — my brothers teased me that I could not stand seeing my own ugly reflection. If only they knew. I was becoming ugly, I knew that — it's hard to maintain a good appearance without mirrors for makeup, and even harder to look happy when you're being watched by the devil,

I managed to completely avoid seeing the image for eight months. At times I managed to seem normal. but I was always scheming to avoid her seeing me. My mother sent me to a psychiatrist, but I ran away from there when I saw the reflective silver stars on her walls — meant to be cheerful but instead terrifying. They were only peep-holes for her to watch me through.

Then one day, when I was seventeen, I came home to see my mother had done spring-cleaning. The windows sparkled with a near-transparent image of the spy. Even the netball cups I had won

before discovering her were displayed on the mantelpiece, their newly-cleaned silver proudly reflecting what I used to think was me. I ran to the sanctuary of my mirrorless bedroom.

She looked straight at me, taunting me with a replica of my own paranoid face. My mother had cleaned my mirror for me.

I threw a sneaker at the mirror to smash it. She continued to watch me, the face more disfigured by cracks in the glass. I grabbed a sliver of it and thrust it into my chest, preferring death to this life tormented by the devil's spy. As I slipped into unconsciousness I heard her speak to me.

"You needn't be afraid... I'm only your guardian angel."

Part II

It was not until my twelfth birthday that I realised the face I saw in the mirror was not mine.

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It started with a gift. My birthday had been going perfectly, until I opened the last box, a box which been jiggling in anticipation all by itself. Inside was a kitten... perfect, white, and dead.

Our faces went as white as the cat. "Oh Hannah, I'm so sorry!" gasped my mother. "There mustn't have been enough air in the box... it's all my fault... I should have..."

I rushed to the bathroom to cover my imminent sobs. But my shock was met by a second shockwave when I saw myself in the mirror. I had a scratch on my cheek, which was bleeding. I went back to the lounge to show my mother.

"Hey, why didn't you tell me my cheek was scratched? Where's the Sav?"

My mother's nervous expression collapsed into a blank stare, too fatigued to complete the transformation to confusion. "Scratched?"

"Yeah, I don't know how it happened."

My parents exchanged worried looks, and I wondered if they'd thought I'd hurt myself while doing something naughty.

"I know you're upset about the cat, but you don't have to pretend you're hurt. We promise we'll get you a new kitten."

"But I'm not pretending," I protested, moving my hand to the affected cheek. "I..." I stopped speaking when I felt the smooth, unbroken skin.

"Look, how about we all have birthday cake and try to forget about it for now?" said my dad.

So I pretended to forget. It was easy to let my family think I was upset about the cat, and not the phantom scratch. Before I went to bed that night I looked in the mirror again. The scratch was still there, but already starting to heal over.

I spent all the next day in front of my mirror, examining the image and comparing it to photos. I noticed several subtle differences — her eyes were a slightly different shade, she had fewer freckles. And she had that scratch. I wondered what had happened to her. I hoped that it did not hurt her too much. I hoped that she wasn't my own future.

So where did she come from? I asked my mother if I'd ever had a twin sister. She looked at me the same way she had when I'd asked about the scratch, and said no. I knew better than to continue and risk being sent to a nuthouse. I told her not to worry about getting a new cat.

After that, my reflection always looked a little scared, and maybe I did as well. It sure felt weird to look in a mirror and know that there was somebody else looking into my world. I wished I could ask her who she was, what was troubling her.

A few times I thought I saw a white cat in the background. Had my kitty escaped into her dimension, or was I subconsciously so upset about her that I saw her everywhere?

As time went on, I began feeling increasingly uneasy, even when I wasn't looking in a mirror. I kept having the feeling that something wasn't quite right, something in my peripheral vision that escaped my attention. It was my little brother Bob who first realised what it was, as we walked past some shop windows one Saturday.

"Hey, Han, you're a vampire!"

"And you're a tasty little troll!" I retorted, leaping toward him in mock menace.

He bolted with a shriek of true terror, bawling and screaming until he was out of sight.

"Geez, I was only joking!" I said to my parents. "You'd think at ten, he wouldn't be scared so easily!"

It took us fifteen minutes to find Bob again, and another half an hour to coax him out of his hiding place. When we got home, he raced to his room.

"Bobby," I called through the door. "You know I was only joking, why'd you run away like that?"

"Go away!"

After much pleading, he eventually let me in. He was wearing two sets of rosary beads and clinging to a Bible. I couldn't help laughing, and he almost joined me with a slight smile. I sat as close to him as he would allow. The fear returned to his face, and he pointed to his mirror.

When I saw his pale face in the mirror, I felt my own face go white. I felt it, but did not see it; in the reflection, Bob was scared and alone. I had no reflection.

"I swear I'm not a vampire," I said. I explained what had happened. I'm sure I was even more relieved than he was that the truth was finally out. He seemed especially happy to hear that my doppelgänger had the cat.

"Can I tell you a secret?" asked Bob.

"Sure... if you can trust your secrets to a vampire," I grinned reassuringly.

"When I was a little kid, I used to think my reflection was my guardian angel. I tried moving really fast to see if he would keep up

with me. I swear sometimes he didn't. And we played rock paper scissors against each other. But when I grew up, I thought I had just made it up when Dad read to me about Peter Pan's shadow."

I stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe our reflections are all guardian angels. But what happened to mine?"

It was a scary black hole of a question, which got deeper as reflections kept disappearing. Soon my bedroom mirror showed only darkness. I was afraid to touch it, lest I be drawn into a dark mirror-world.

I longed to see her again, to reassure both of us that we were not alone. I grew much closer to my brother, who would tell me whether I'd combed my hair straight, and let me sit with him and his own reflection when I missed my own. The secret stayed between us. I stayed away from mirrors in public, and found that most people did not notice the missing reflections in other shiny surfaces.

One day, when I was seventeen, I came home to see my mother had done some spring-cleaning. And it was more than just a clean. The windows, my trophies, everything was so clean that I could see my reflection in it. I rushed to my room to at last get a good view of my angel, afraid that she would soon disappear again.

There she was, looking so scared that I tried to reach out and comfort her. She responded by throwing a sneaker at me.

The mirror remained intact, but the image broke into shards, reflecting pieces of her strangely unfamiliar bedroom. I tried to make sense of the images speeding across one shard, until I saw the end of it reflecting what was unmistakably blood. I watched as the blood took over the rest of the shard, and sprayed onto the others. I watched her beating heart approaching me from the mirror. Too late, I realised who needed to protect whom. Too late, I told her what we both needed to hear.

"You needn't be afraid... I'm only your guardian angel."

And for one last time, the mirror was accurate. As her heart stopped beating, my heart broke.

