

## Two-Way Mirror

Jane Hoppe

“Sit up, Lu, or you’ll turn into a hunchback.”

Two swift taps on my shoulder jerk me back to the land of the living. Mom bustles past the table, brandishing a knife at a fat pumpkin sat on the kitchen counter.

“It’s almost Halloween, Momma. She’d fit right in anyway.” Asher scribbles on the pumpkin strewn newspaper layered on the table in front of him, violent streaks of blue and orange combining into a brown mush. I wince at how hard he drags the crayons across the brittle page.

“Ash darling, kind words please.” With a thunk the knife plunges into the pumpkin as Mom begins to carve. I go back to staring down my plate, spine stiff and straight as a flagpole. Mom makes that low humming noise in her throat, somewhere between a croon and a growl. I tried to imitate it once; it made my tongue taste like rust. “Communing with your breakfast again, Lucy?”

“Doing my best. French toast has a thick accent.”

“Mm, well, wrap up the conversation or you’ll make us late for church.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, mother.” I lift my fork and swill the food around my plate, mixing the toast and maple syrup into a mush not unlike Asher’s drawing. I prod my cold eggs into two sections so they resemble eyes over the grinning slice of soggy bread. The face is twisted and beaming. My stomach turns.

Mom hums again, pumpkin guts splatting in the big metal bowl on the counter beside her. I sigh and shovel some French toast mush into my mouth, trying not to gag. Then I expertly pick apart the eggs so it looks like I made an effort and slip the remains to the bin on my way to the sink.

Fifteen minutes later Ash and I are dragging our feet to the crusty old van while Mom honks at us to hurry up, before remembering she left her phone or her chapstick or something and rushing back inside to grab the object she can’t live without. Twenty minutes and we’re finally swerving out of our lazy dead-end street, running a record ten minutes late.

*“With All Hallows’ Eve a mere week away now, we’re looking ahead to some possible storms rolling in from Big Lake. Stock up on rain-wear to keep those trick-or-treaters nice and dry!”* Mom switches the station to K-Love and careens through a red light.

The Katsville radio station made the same ominous prediction for Halloween every year. Every year the skies were empty. I think they just liked to incite a little anxiety to keep things exciting. Not much else going on ‘round this season in a rural Midwest town like Katsville, aside from the odd drunken fight outside the only bar. There weren’t even any spooky legends or ghost stories to tell; just a bland old town with a blander history book and a probably just-as-bland future.

Plenty of pumpkin farms, though.

I look out my window as we pass one, a withering brown field splattered with orange. Catching my own eye in the reflection, I think about my egg face and try to imitate it. My mouth doesn't stretch quite far and my eyes squint like an overexcited preschooler. We pause at an all-way and a grinning pumpkin-headed scarecrow smiles back at me, black paint smeared in a friendly arc under his peg nose as he entices customers to buy his brethren.

I stick out my tongue but we've already left him in the dust.

We get to church only three minutes late, a testament to my mother's skill at breaking road law in the name of Jesus. Sunday School and the service drag by. I watch a dust bunny drift across the pulpit while the pastor does his sermon, a dainty gray dancer caught in the repulsive draft of warm breath and shifting feet. Mom slaps my leg, muttering something about making faces.

The dust bunny drifts to the far end of the sanctuary, landing beneath one of the tall rectangle windows. For a second it's caught in a slant of white autumn light, casting the clump of hair and dirt in an almost angelic sheen before the congregation stands for the benediction and a new wave of disturbance flushes the clump of dust back into shadow.

"Comin' to the Spooky Bash tonight, Lucy?" Luke asks me as the congregation trickles out of the sanctuary, buzzing at each other like insects. The high school youth leader shows me his teeth, perfect and white and welcoming as he leans at the end of my pew. No escape.

An entourage of pretty girls in modest but stylish autumn dresses float in his wake, though they keep a noticeable distance when they see who Luke is talking to. Their families have probably never left the county, sitting on their mounds of land blocking out the view of Big Lake for anyone without private access.

I pick at the edge of my drooping black maxi dress, slouching so they're out of my field of vision. "'Dunno," I reply, distracted. Rookie mistake.

"Oh, come on now Lu!" Luke leans in and I can smell the Listerine on his breath. I hate that nickname, though I can't tell if I hate it more when it's not my mother using it. "We miss seeing you around at youth group. It's a shame you've got that Sunday night class."

Right. That totally existent Sunday night class. I'm still not quite sure if he's gullible enough to actually buy that or if he's just being polite enough not to call out my flimsy lie.

"Look, I'm sure you can brush it off for one night. It's almost Halloween! You deserve some time to relax! October's always such a busy month for you kids and it's important to get out for a change, you know? If you just ask I'm sure..."

He rambles on until I sigh and slowly nod my head.

"Perfect!" Luke chirps, then looks over his shoulder. "Abs! Lucy is up for Spooky Bash tonight, mind giving her a ride?"

Abs—not the six pack kind but instead a terrible nickname for Abigail—flounces over to Luke, big gold hoop earrings bouncing against her neck. I swear she adds a little skip to her step to make them do that.

"Sure, Luke!" Abigail hooks an elbow over his shoulder. "What's her number? So she can text me an address."

“Um.” Christ, I’m standing right here. “You could just put your number in my phone.”

“Oh yeah, duhh,” she says, tilting her head like she never would’ve thought of it. I hand her my phone and her bright red nails click against the screen as she types. It reminds me of the way my dead dog Jameson’s nails used to tap across the kitchen floor.

When she hands the phone back, I accidentally return her gaze for a full, awful moment of eye contact. Shit. Those blue-ringed pupils bore into me, expectant, like a predator waiting for me to make the first move before they pounce. Abigail is smiling, all feigned friendliness drained from her face, mouth twisting into a warped indulgent pleasure.

I fumble my phone and it falls, thudding like a gavel on the smooth floorboards. No one moves to pick it up.

“Pick you up at 8,” Abigail says, tone cheery but smile unchanged as she turns to rejoin her posse. No one seems to notice anything out of place so maybe I’m just going crazy. Or worse, no one thought that mouth was wrong at all. Luke waves after her and shoots me a thumbs up as he’s pulled away by a gaggle of high school boys asking how scary their costumes are allowed to be.

I stand there. The sweaty heat of the sanctuary makes me nauseous. I’m still thinking about Abigail when I feel two sharp taps on my shoulder.

“You make a better door than a window, Lu,” Mom remarks, gesturing for me to move so she can leave the pew and dragging a whining Asher by the wrist behind her. I think about telling her the phrase doesn’t make any sense in this context but she’s already shouldering past me. “I need to get Ash home. You know your phone is on the floor?”

“Yeah,” I mumble, squeezing into my seat so she and Ash can pass by. I pick up my phone and turn it over to check the face isn’t cracked, which of course, it is. Then I nearly drop it again as in the moment before the screen lights up, I glimpse my face in the black reflection. I’m smiling, too.

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Abigail pulls into my driveway twelve minutes late and I can hear peppy pop music and high pitched laughter from my front step. She doesn’t get out. The sky is thick with clouds. Against all my better instincts, I shuffle toward the back passenger door of her electric blue minivan and tug on the handle until she remembers to unlock it.

I thought about canceling all day. But after Mom made me send “Abs” my address I avoided my phone. Every time I reached for it my chest tightened. It was stupid. I had a weird morning, is all. Not the first time Mom’s cooking made me loopy. Yet part of me knew with absolute certainty what I would see when I looked down at that screen. It was dumb. It was my social anxiety spiking and playing tricks, making excuses.

Still, the image of my reflection played in my mind, joyful and distorted and cruel beneath the hairline cracks in the screen’s dark surface.

So I distracted myself. Helped Asher carve his grimacing Jack O’ Lantern and impressed Mom with the most thorough dishwashing I’d even done in my life. She helped me piece together a costume (since I hadn’t been planning on going anywhere and hadn’t bothered to

make one), lending me her makeup and a lacy black shawl that was probably one of the nicest things she owned.

“The only time I wore it was your grandmother’s funeral,” she said, her voice distant. “She told me she wore it the day she immigrated from Bolivia. Always went on about how it was cursed, made things disappear.”

“Spooky,” I noted. Mom wasn’t Bolivian. Abuela Patricia had sided with her during the divorce. I was never sure why but she was dead a couple years later anyway.

Mom let out a short chuckle. “Yes, she was very proud of her stories. You two would have gotten along too well.” She hummed, picking a fuzz off my shoulder. “You should keep it. It’s only taking up space in my drawers.”

I clutch the lacy shawl close as I squeeze between two faux-bloodstained cheerleaders, praying it doesn’t catch on anything. Abigail sits in the driver seat, flipping through a playlist while her two friends throw out song requests, hardly noticing I’m there. Carson, a lumbering senior boy also in youth group who I almost used to be friends with in junior high, lounges in the passenger seat on his phone.

He’s the only one who looks up as I settle myself inelegantly into the middle seat. Carson is dressed as a bloodied football player, a deep purple bruise over his left eye that might not be makeup. “Cool costume,” he says over the din of the other girls.

“Banshee,” I reply, making an exaggerated face of screeching horror.

“Neat.”

Abigail finally picks a song and starts backing out of my driveway as the other girls groan over her selection. They start gossiping again but their words sound like radio static as we rocket across the midwestern expanse of corn fields and more pumpkin farms, the latter of which are glowing with string lights and Jack O’ Lantern grins. I am acutely aware of an oncoming bout of motion sickness and I wish I could lean on the window to focus on the sky. My phone buzzes in my hand and I realize the screen is facing up. A shiver crawls up my spine and I make a pact with myself to look straight ahead until we get to the church.

Outside is fully dark when we pull into the parking lot but the windows of the youth ministry room at the corner of the building are flickering with light and silhouettes of the people inside. It’s drizzling now, cold and miserable, making the inside lights look that much more welcoming. Everyone jumps out, still chatting away, and the girl whose side I’m getting out on nearly slams the door on me. She throws me an “Oops, sorry!” as I slide out just in time.

I move to follow after them but someone is grabbing my hand. Someone is pulling my hand back toward the car and they will not let go and I nearly drop my phone again as they yank me backward, nails digging into my skin until I’m sure they’ll break it. Then I turn and find the lacy shawl has tangled around my wrist and caught itself in the car door.

Something in my chest pops, quiet, like a deflating balloon. And I laugh. A big, genuine laugh at how ridiculous the thought was, at every prick of anxiety that’s threatened to make me implode today, the same spiral that happens every day.

“Abigail!” I call, and she turns around at the sound of my voice.

“Oh, GOD!” Abigail yelps, a bit over the top, but she unlocks her car again and I rescue my costume. “You okay?!”

“Yeah!” I reply. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Meet us inside, Banshee girl!” Carson calls back with a grin.

I wave, then look at my phone and for a split second I see my face smiling back at him. Then the screen lights up. *Have fun!* reads a text from Mom.

I take a deep breath and walk up to the glass door at the entrance. It’s a shimmering portal leading from the empty night to the mass of lights and food and people on the other side. I focus on my faint reflection in the window and imagine my body is one of them.

Carson is waving at me from the banquet table and before I can even pull the handle Lucy walks through the door. She walks over to Carson and she kisses him, long and deep, and he puts his hand to her back, fingers threading through her shawl’s soft black lace. Her lipstick smears across my face. Her teeth bite my cheek. At last she lets go and Abigail laughs, throwing her red-speckled arms over Lucy’s shoulders.

I watch her from the window; I watch her body dance between the others, watch her talking and eating and laughing, watch her kiss again. At some point she looks over her shoulder to where I stand, locked in the glass. Rain patters around me but I do not feel it. I’m cold and I rub my bare arms as Lucy pulls her shawl close and smiles softly. *See how it feels?*

I look down at my phone and the screen forgets to light up. “Give us a real smile,” I say.

Lucy laughs. “You never did it right!”

She grins and my mouth stretches until it hurts. My cheeks split and the taste of rust spills over my tongue, filling my throat and dripping down my neck. Lucy reaches out and taps my shoulder twice. I know what comes next.

“Oh, Lu. You never deserved them, anyway.”