The Mirror

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by Carol Abel

I GLANCED up from my prone position on the floor as my younger sister knocked and poked her head through my bedroom door.

“Sue, are you busy?” she asked, drying her long black hair with a big bath towel.

“In case you’re blind today, I’m right in the middle of polishing my nails. What do you want?”

“Will you roll my hair when you get done?”

That wasn’t surprising, she always wanted me to roll her hair. “Bev, you certainly have a knack for picking the worst possible time when you want a favor. Why can’t you do it yourself?” I put the lid on the nail polish and sat up, admiring my nails.

“I don’t mind waiting till your nails dry. I don’t want you to ruin them.” She smiled and sat down on the floor facing me.

I smiled back icily. “Thanks. I didn’t intend to. But I still don’t see why you can’t do your own hair.”

“You know you can do it a lot better than I can.” She lowered her eyes and picked at the towel in her lap.

“So? You don’t improve any without practice you know. How do you think I learned to do mine?” I remembered! My older sister always had time to put Beverly’s hair in long curls because she was “such a little doll.” But, when it came to me, I always got suck with pigtails! I wanted curls so badly that I learned to fix them myself. I’d show ’em.

Bev interrupted my thoughts. “Bill—you know that cute boy I was telling you about the other day. He asked me for a date tonight and I want to look real nice. Please, Sue?” Her eyes sparkled with anticipation of the coming evening.

“Oh—all right. Come on.” No wonder the whole family makes over her so much. I can’t resist those velvety brown
eyes either. Why did she have to get all the looks? “Sit over here.” I motioned toward the low bench in front of the mirror. My precious mirror that had taken months of baby sitting for me to afford, but it was worth it. Everything in my room was just perfect—my haven of security. I had painted the soft cream walls and made the green and brown striped bedspread with matching drapes myself. I had labored painstakingly over the smooth gold pillows that added just the right accent. After I had scrimped for months, Mom had finally consented to pay half on the furry, gold rug at the foot of my bed—it made the whole room sparkle.

Just as I finished rolling her hair, she said eagerly, “Would you like to manicure my nails?”

“Can’t you do anything yourself? What are you going to do when I go to Kansas City to work next summer?” I sat down beside her and jerked her hand around so I could work on it.

“At least I won’t have to be compared with you all the time.” She lowered her head and bit her bottom lip.

“Ha! You know you couldn’t do anything wrong if you tried as far as this family is concerned.” They won’t even miss me next summer, I thought bitterly. I don’t care. I hate the farm anyway. I’ll be glad to get away from it. “Why don’t you take better care of your nails? They’re a mess. If you wouldn’t ride that stupid horse all . . .”

Bev stood up abruptly, snatching her hand from my grip. She stood staring down at me with her eyes full of tears. “See, I never do anything right! Why do you always have to criticize me? You’ve always been able to do everything. I’m scared to do anything because I know I can’t begin to compete with you. Why wouldn’t I be self-conscious?” Tears were streaming down her face as she ran from the room and slammed the door.

I sat staring at the door, too stunned to move or think. Odors from the open bottles of my manicure kit were suddenly burning my nostrils, snapping my reeling brain back into focus. A wave of self-hatred and bitterness engulfed me. I forced myself to look in the mirror. I shuddered. I despised the ugly things I saw in the reflection that stared back at me. I threw my hands over my face, but I couldn’t ease the disgusting image of myself. I crumpled to the floor, sobbing.