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SAMPLE BOOK PAGES FROM

Deceptive Bends

Michael Psciuk

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WHAT REVIEWERS HAVE SAID ...

‘Merging horror and science fiction and set against otherwise ordinary situations, these short stories vary from the touching, to the quirky, to the gripping; there is a lot of variation between the individual stories (with no two being directly related), but there is something here for everyone’.

BOOK REVIEW from Amazon Reviewer Benjamin Harrison

‘This is a collection of short stories each with a completely different central storyline. They show the skill of the writer in pitching us into both American and British scenarios; similarly, the stories range from tales of the past to visions of the future and time-travel’.

BOOK REVIEW from Amazon reviewer Michael Watson

Beyond Reflection

Craig sat in his brother's room and looked around at the neatness of the place. He couldn't help but be reminded of an uncle who had a military background and retained the same sense of order and discipline many years after returning to civilian life.

He walked over to the bookshelf and pulled out one of his brother's favourites. Running his fingertips over the surface of the hardback book, he returned to sit on the bed and then absent-mindedly turned the pages. When he had lost interest he placed the book on the bed beside him and waited for the sound of Billy's voice to tell him to put the book back where he found it.

His voice never came, nor would it ever come again. No book would ever be opened, no clothes in the wardrobe would ever be worn, no music and laughter would ever be heard coming from this room and the bed Craig now sat on would never be slept in again. He corrected himself; other people may make use of these things in time but not his brother.

Closing his eyes, he visualized Billy walking out of his room almost a year ago with a backward glance and a good-natured warning, "I'm telling you ... if there is one thing out of place when I get back ... you're dead!"

Last words that haunted Craig long after the events of that evening unfolded. He recalled waiting for his brother's return, when the call came through from the hospital. There had been a fatal accident; a drunken driver, still full of rage from a marital dispute had taken off in his car at top speed in the wrong direction only to meet Billy coming the other way. While the driver managed to escape without a mark, his brother was killed outright.

How many times since that night Craig had watched his mother staring out the window as if she expected to see Billy cycling homeward on the last stretch of his journey.

Tears started to form and then spill over as he thought of his nineteen-year-old brother's life tragically cut short. Returning video rentals had always been Craig's job, yet that particular night his brother had decided to change the routine, borrowed Billy's bike and took off on his last journey.

He was now thinking of something odd that happened that night shortly before the tragedy unfolded. While sitting on his brother's bed waiting for him to come back from the toilet, the strangest feeling passed through him. At the same time, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the glass on the old full-length mirror against the wall seemed to shimmer. He blinked hard in the hope that it would clear his vision. Yet when he looked back again, it still gave the impression of a surface of water that had just been agitated, or the tremor of a small earthquake but then he reminded himself that he was in England not Japan. As he looked on in amazement, the mirror returned to its normal state and the unpleasant feeling passed almost as quickly as it had arrived.

When Billy came back into the room Craig recalled saying, "I know this sounds strange but did you feel anything unusual before you came in here?"

"I had the feeling I was going to be sick in the toilet ... I feel OK now though."

"I felt it too. There's something else that seems weird, the mirror ..."

He didn't get a chance to finish.

"Tell me later. I need to get some fresh air and ... I'll take the videos back."

Witnessing the toll it had taken on his parents, grief etched into their faces and movements, at times almost ghost-like, made him feel that he had gone against the natural order of things. And now, while he pondered what happened that night, he could hear his parents downstairs packing for a trip to the coast, both still reluctant to go far from home since the accident, yet making the effort to get on with their lives. Craig made the excuse that he would stay behind to look for a summer job, instead of giving his real reason: to allow his parents some time together.

Catching his reflection in the old mirror, he went over to take a closer look and checked to make sure his eyes didn't appear red before he went downstairs. Without thinking, he reached out to touch the mirror but instead of meeting its cold hard surface his fingers vanished into the glass and at the same time, he felt a slight tingling sensation. Withdrawing his hand quickly he stepped back in shock.

Still shaken by what had just happened, he approached the mirror again and repeated what he had just done. This time not only his fingers went through but his arm all the way up to his elbow before he withdrew it. The feeling was like a small electric

charge. Not enough to cause pain but enough to make him aware of its presence. Instead of obeying the urge to turn and run, he brought his head forward, closed his eyes automatically as if to protect them and then stepped through the now non-existent glass.

He was standing in the same place he had just left but facing away from the mirror. As he tried to figure out what had just happened to make him believe that he had actually gone through a solid mirror, he walked back to the bed and sat down. He wondered with growing fear if the loss of his brother was making him start to lose his mind. Telling his parents before they left that he had just had a weird hallucination would not be a good idea, he thought.

Then he noticed something that startled him. The book that he had placed on the bed was no longer where he had left it. It was back in its place on the shelf and, as he wondered how this could have happened, a voice made him sit up.

“Billy! We’re ready to go now. Come down here and help us load the car.”

Craig wondered what could have made his father call on Billy. Perhaps his parents had just been talking about the approaching anniversary of his death and confused the names. Then a sudden chill ran through him as he heard another voice, this time much closer.

“Hang on a minute, dad! I’m just going to my room to get something!”

As he heard the approaching footsteps he was already moving towards the mirror. Too stunned to even consider what was going on, he launched himself at the glass and braced himself automatically for an impact that never came. He landed on the floor and looked up. The book was on the bed just where he had left it. Then he almost jumped out of his skin as he heard his father shout, “Craig! We’re ready to go now. Come down here and help us load the car.”

Going down the stairs he tried his best to look as if nothing had happened but the look on his mother’s face was making him feel uncomfortable. Just before she got into the car she said, “Craig, are you all right? You look a bit pale.”

His father rescued him by saying, “Stop fussing mother, you know he can look after himself. He’ll be getting fed at his Aunt Kate’s house every day so there’s no reason for him setting the house on fire! Anyway, he has the hotel number if anything should need our attention.”

With a hug and a wave of the hand they were gone. As he watched his father's car recede into the distance he suddenly felt younger than his sixteen years. Somewhat reluctantly, he went back into the house, sat himself down on the sofa and switched on the television; the need for noise and images to surround him as he explored what had just happened.

The realm of science fiction seemed the only place to explain what he had just experienced. He thought of all the books he had read and the movies he had seen and the one idea that stood out from all the others was that of a parallel universe. If another version of Billy was alive on the other side of the mirror, then he realized with a startle that someone else could have walked into the room, another version of himself; a prospect more fearful than fascinating.

What had caused it to happen, he wondered and was the same thing happening with mirrors all over the world? If so, was it all part of a plan or the result of an accident?

The more he thought about it, the less sure he became that it had all happened in the first place and by the time he had gone to bed, he was already trying to convince himself that it could have been a kind of hallucination. Yet sleep wouldn't come. And while he lay motionless looking at the ceiling, he saw his attempted denial for what it was, a delaying tactic to stop him from going back to face the truth.

Rationalizing that he wasn't a child anymore, he decided that the middle of the night might be a good time to either confirm or refute what had happened. If that other Billy really existed, then he would either be sleeping, or perhaps parallel to his own family, may have decided to go to the coast with his parents.

He went into his brother's room and switched on the light. Approaching the mirror, he felt his courage deserting him, then after some hesitation he cautiously tested the mirror. Once again, a slight jolt passed through him as he gradually left the familiarity of a well-lit bedroom behind to enter its dark opposite.

With the aid of street lighting and his eyes becoming adjusted, he saw the unmistakable figure of his brother fast asleep. Thoughts of a parallel universe gave way to an almost uncontrollable urge to wake him up and it took every bit of his self-control to stop before the consequences of his actions had been thought out. So he just stood ... and silently wept.

A dog barking outside brought him to his senses. If Billy woke, then Craig would have to offer a reason for being in his brother's room; an excuse that he couldn't sleep might work if he kept the

conversation to a minimum. Then, when Billy eventually fell back to sleep, Craig could slip back through the mirror. There might of course be the problem the next day of the other Craig, knowing nothing of his apparent insomnia, the visit to his brother's room or the conversation that followed. Better he made his exit through the mirror before that scenario even happened.

The next morning over breakfast he planned his next move. His own brother had a summer job every year and perhaps there was a chance that his counterpart might also have a summer job. If that were the case, then he wouldn't be home until the afternoon. If the other Craig kept to routine, then he would have gone with his parents down to the coast.

Sneaking his head through the mirror first, he checked that there was no sound coming from the house and then cautiously entered the room. Opening the door, he checked the hall for the slightest sound and then decided to look in the room that would have been his own on the other side. Relief followed that there was no one there to be shocked by his presence.

He was taken aback by how immaculately clean the room was and almost smiled. His other half was a lot tidier than he had ever been. Even the bed had the appearance that it hadn't been slept in. He smiled as he looked around; his own mother might have approved of this other son.

As he moved down the stair, he noticed that he wasn't being as cautious as he should; the familiarity of everything in its place made him feel that this was his own house.

As he moved from room to room he saw nothing out of the ordinary; he almost took a coke out of the fridge before realizing that it would be missed. And then he did something that he would rarely have thought of doing in his own house; he started going through the drawers. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until he came to a drawer that his own father kept important documents in. He picked up a large collection of official looking papers and, at the same time, something dropped out of the bundle and landed on the floor. He looked down and noticed that it was a bereavement card. He picked it up and opened it. At first it didn't make sense and then realization hit home. He read the note written on the inside of the card:

Dear Andy and Mary,

Words cannot begin to describe the way we all feel about your terrible loss. Please offer my condolences to all the members of your family. Craig was a boy that was so well liked in our community that he will be missed immensely by all those who knew him. Keep your faith that we will all meet again in Jesus.

Should you need to speak me, I'm always at your service.

Your parish priest, Father Andrew McBride.

His hands trembled as he carefully looked through the other papers. Among them he found a death certificate. He swallowed hard as he read the details of that other Craig's life cut short. He started to cry but he wasn't sure for whom he was crying. Was it the realization that it could easily have been his own death back there in his world? Was it a sympathetic understanding of what this family must have gone through? Or was it the fact that he never got the chance to meet his twin brother? He realized it wasn't the time nor the place to think about such matters as there was still too much he had to find out.

Then he noticed something on the death certificate: the time and date of death for Craig in this world and for Billy in his own world was exactly the same. He found a sympathy letter from his Aunt Kate that gave him the details he was looking for. That night, this Billy stayed at home, while Craig made the trip to the video shop as normal. The other facts he was only too aware of.

Voices in the street just outside the front door made him hurry to put things back where he found them. Going over to the window he saw Billy talking to the next-door neighbour, with one hand on the front gate, as if their conversation was just about to come to an end. He had come home early. Craig bolted up the stairs into Billy's room and plunged through the mirror without a backward glance.

As he was running over the details of his discovery, a thought struck him with such a force that his stomach somersaulted. In his haste to make his retreat, the sympathy card from the priest had been left lying on the table instead of in the drawer where it belonged.

What was Billy going to make of that?

Scaring the living daylight out of that other Billy before he had figured out a better way of breaking the ice was not what he wanted to do. Knowing what his own reaction would be if contact were made the other way round, he realized that he would have to go carefully. Then he remembered the previous night, standing in the dark, watching him sleep. The plan he considered at the time to cover his presence in Billy's room would have been a complete disaster if it had been used. The last thing he wanted him to think was that his late brother was back to haunt him. So many thoughts came rushing into his head fighting for attention at the same time. How would that other Craig's parents feel about seeing their son again almost one year after laying him in the ground? How would his own parents feel if he brought Billy back through the mirror and down the stairs?

"Hi mum, dad ... look who's here!"

Still the questions crowded in on him. How come no one else knew about the mirror's capability? His mother cleaned this room regularly every week and no doubt went over its surface each and every time. Why didn't she make the same discovery that he had? Then a line of thought came to him that seemed to make some kind of sense. Perhaps only certain people could go through. Continuing this idea ... perhaps only people who had lost their corresponding self on the other side of the glass were capable of going through. If that was the case, why hadn't Billy made the same find?

He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. It was all getting very complicated and he was starting to feel that this was too much for him to handle alone. He thought of all the people in his immediate circle but none of them, he was sure, would have been useful in this situation. Then it came to him. There was someone who might be of help living not too far from the area.

The town boasted its own science fiction author. Not quite in the same league as the giants of the field but still respected in some circles. He remembered his brother telling him that Colin Rains, if that was his real name, had managed to win some kind of science fiction award a few years ago for a novel about time-travel. One thing was for sure, the tall gangly man with glasses was immensely liked in the town, even if there were those who found him eccentric; his ideas somewhat out of tune with small town life.

Father Andrew McBride stood at the opposite end of the spectrum from Colin in all manners, yet a friendship developed between them that surprised the townsfolk. Their good-natured

verbal jousting matches usually always ended up in hilarity with Father McBride, the more dogmatic of the two offering to pray for Colin's wayward soul. He in turn never took offence at the priest's efforts to bring him back to the fold. Craig and his brother were also drawn to this unconventional man and sometimes all three went to a coffee shop in town to spend a couple of hours talking about everything from alien landings to the latest scientific breakthroughs.

That evening, he decided that he would give him a call to arrange a meeting. If anybody could follow what was going on around here, it would be Colin. Meanwhile, he decided that he would have to start taking down notes before he lost track. Then he remembered his father's mini cassette player sitting in a drawer downstairs, hardly used. He spent the next couple of hours dictating and editing all the details from the crash up to the present and then, thinking it better to keep to his routine, ate at his Aunt Kate's house. Later, he rang Colin's house and was disappointed to hear from the author's wife that he wouldn't be back until the following day. That meant he would have to go it alone for a little while longer.

The next morning he decided to make another visit to the other side of the glass. Once again he stood, top half in that other world, listened carefully for any sounds in the house before he stepped through. As he reached the top of the stair and just before his descent, he became irritated by the fact that he needed to go to the bathroom. This never happens in the movies, he thought.

He had just flushed the toilet and was automatically washing his hands when a voice outside the door made him freeze. The owner was unmistakable even though the voice trembled.

"I don't know who you are in there but you'd better come out now before I call the police! And don't try any funny stuff because I've got a baseball bat here!"

Realizing that he was trapped started him shaking from head to foot. The baseball bat he knew was real enough because he had one just like it in his own room and it also dawned on him that this Billy must have been ready and waiting for him in Craig's room. It was too late now to wonder why he hadn't been more alert. Remaining silent would only be effective until the police arrived to break the door down. There seemed to be no other alternative; the bathroom window looked too small and the fall too high, even if it were possible to squeeze through the window.

Revelation time had come and as he slowly opened the door he hoped he wouldn't have to defend himself against the twin of his own baseball bat before he had a chance to talk.

The expression of horror and fear he witnessed was one that he had never seen the likes of on his own brother's face. Billy backed up until there was no place to go; the wall had stopped his retreat.

"Billy, I know what it must look like but listen to me ... Please!"

The realization that he had no more room to retreat gave the young man the appearance of a trapped animal. Instinctively, he propelled himself forward and was half way down the stairs before he was brought to a halt by Craig's voice, "Billy! Ghosts don't use the toilet!"

Pale and trembling, he spun around.

"Who the hell are you? If my brother had a twin, then surely to God I would have known about it?"

Craig knew that he'd better give Billy a safe distance if he wanted this conversation to continue.

"You have to believe me when I tell you that this is as big a shock to me as it is to you. I've known about it a little longer than you have and that's all the advantage I have. If you will just listen to me, I will tell you as much as I know, beyond that ... I hope that you might be able to help me find out what's going on."

Billy moved into a crouching position on the stairs while he listened to Craig tell the whole story.

When he had finished talking, he waited for a response but Billy looked as if he was still recovering from the shock.

"Billy, I swear I mean you no harm"

After what seemed an eternity, Billy said, "You say that the doorway is through the mirror in my room?"

"Yes."

"How come I never came across it before?"

"I don't know the answer to that one but ... maybe you had no reason to touch the mirror. Perhaps your mother would have been the only one to come into contact with it while she was cleaning it ... I'm guessing, Billy. There's only one way to find out, let's go up to your room now and test it out."

Billy hesitated for a few seconds, gripped the baseball bat even tighter and then slowly started his ascent towards the bedroom.

Not wanting to scare him by too close a proximity, Craig went ahead of him into the room and over to the mirror. Without hesitation, he inserted his hand into the glass. Craig noticed the look of astonishment on Billy's face just before he vanished through to the other side. As he popped his head back through

again, Billy almost demolished his bookshelf as he sprung back with shock. Now fully in the same room, Craig said, "I need to know now if I'm the only one who can pass through this mirror. Could you come here and try to do the same?"

Again hesitating before he made his move, Billy approached the mirror. Craig could see his hand shaking as it went forward to touch the glass and then he saw it vanish up to the wrist. The speed of his withdrawal almost made Craig jump. With some persuasion, he made another attempt and this time he went all the way through, followed by Craig. Against Billy's protestations, Craig convinced him that he wasn't in the same room anymore by making him step through the glass and back again.

"Do you feel any different on this side?"

"Yes, there's a ... strange little vibration ... almost like an electric charge humming inside my body, though ... not painful."

"I know, Billy, I feel the same when I'm through on your side."

Whether it was because of the familiarity of the surroundings or the mind's ability to forget what it doesn't want to know, they easily fell into conversation. Billy, being the more scientific minded one of the two, offered some theories of what might be behind it all and Craig the more paranormally inclined, countered with ideas of his own. After hours of conversation they both appeared to be moving towards a common theory of what might have happened. The fact that not so long ago each had mourned the other's death was no longer uppermost in their minds.

They made a tentative agreement on the following: their two worlds seemed to have been a mirror image of each other up until the night of the accident. Something perhaps shifted, knocking both sides out of alignment and from that point onwards things seemed to drift apart, some dramatically and some hardly noticeable. They both agreed that perhaps only those who had lost their mirror image either side of the glass could cross over but before they could be sure of that theory they would have to put it to the test.

Though they wanted to spend more time with each other they thought it would be wiser to keep to their routines in case anybody became suspicious. What affect this might have on the outside world, should it become known, was beyond their comprehension at this point. On a lesser scale but just as important to them both, was the question of what they would tell their parents. They decided that was a bridge they were going to have to cross when they came to it. Craig gave Billy the tape

recorder so that he could listen to a more detailed account of what had happened up to their meeting in case there was anything he had left out.

Before Billy stepped back through the mirror, he turned to look at Craig and said, "I don't know why this has happened or where it might be leading but ... I'm happy to have my brother back."

Before Craig had a chance to say anything, Billy was gone from the room back into his own world. That afternoon he phoned Colin's house and this time he was relieved to hear that he was back in town. Though he didn't give the reason why, he did say that he needed the author's help rather urgently. Colin sounded suitably concerned on the phone and offered to come around to his house later that evening. Colin arrived a few minutes after eight and was given little time to prepare himself for what he was about to hear.

"Colin, you write about time travel, parallel universes and such but do you actually believe things like that will ever be possible?"

"I like to think I write along those lines because I'm open-minded enough to believe they're possible."

"What if someone came up to you with the proof that there is a parallel universe, what would you say?"

"Well, I'd say that there's enough of the scientist in me to want to see the proof."

"What if I told you that I can give you the proof here and now, in this very house."

Colin at first had an amused look on his face but then it changed to an inquisitive one.

"If you're being serious and you certainly look it, convince me. Otherwise, I would suggest that you lay off the science fiction for a while."

This time, Craig smiled and said, "Are you ready?"

"OK Craig but I get the feeling that I'm being set up for some kind of practical joke here, so let's get on with it."

They both went up the stairs and into Billy's room and while Craig stood in front of the mirror, Colin sat on the bed with a puzzled expression on his face. When he saw the boy's hand vanish up to the elbow, the look on his face changed to one of surprise followed by one of shock when he saw the boy vanish through the mirror and just as suddenly reappear. Cautiously, he came and stood beside Craig and brought his hand up towards the glass. The solid surface that seemed like liquid moments before now stopped his hand from repeating the performance.

“Colin, I know that you might be thinking this is some kind of magic trick that I have dreamed up but what you’re about to see now will really shake you up so ... be prepared.”

Craig went back through the mirror and then just as Colin was beginning to wonder what would happen next, he reemerged. This time the boy stepped back out of the way as if waiting for something to happen and then ... Billy stepped through.

The look on Colin’s face was one of utter shock. He had attended Billy’s funeral and had been given the honour of reading the eulogy for the boy. Now here was the same boy standing in front of him, smiling.

Colin was speechless and it took Billy to break the ice, “Colin, I know how you must be feeling. Up until I trapped Craig in the bathroom, I thought I was either being visited by a ghost, or a burglar with a weak bladder. I’ve never been so frightened in my life, yet ... it’s amazing how quickly you adapt to situations ...”

Colin interrupted and, at the same time, seemed to rock on his heels.

“Now wait a minute! I’m not adapting to this situation too well. So, would somebody please go back to the beginning and explain to me what the hell is going on here!”

They all moved downstairs to get away from the now claustrophobic atmosphere of the bedroom. Craig poured Colin a large whisky to steady his nerves and the brothers waited patiently until he had downed half of it before the conversation began in earnest. Once again the whole story unfolded but this time both brothers were giving the details, while Colin sat astounded, listening with rapt attention.

When they had covered all the shared knowledge they had, Billy got up and paced the floor, with a concerned look on his face then he said, “There is something that I haven’t even told you yet, Craig. Now seems like the right time.

“On our side, your other half Colin ... is not the same person he was before our two worlds shifted out of place. His/Your unconventional ideas, after the shift, got dangerously out of hand with him. He announced that he was having visions of worlds in collision and that he had been chosen to tell what was about to happen. The fact that nobody wanted to listen to what he had to say was pushing him over the edge and when his behaviour started becoming uncontrollable, a neighbour sent for Father McBride thinking that, as they had been close friends, he might listen to the priest. Nobody realized how far beyond reason he had gone and how dangerous the situation would be for Father

McBride. Later, when the neighbours saw Colin running screaming out of his house, brandishing a blood stained knife, the full horror of what had happened struck home. The priest's lifeless body was found in a kneeling position in the living room. A frantic search for Colin's wife was then called-off when a neighbour confirmed that she had gone back to live with her mother.

The gentle, easy-going Colin Rains of this world sat horrified, listening to what his counterpart had done on the other side. Then, white as a sheet, he finished off the glass of whisky and asked, "What happened to him after that?"

"He was captured and put in a high security psychiatric hospital but here unfortunately is the twist ... he escaped a couple of days ago and is now on the loose. Until Craig here made himself known, I was starting to wonder if Colin might have been behind the strange goings-on."

This opened up a whole new area of discussion but all three decided that they'd had more than enough for one night. Billy mentioned before heading back that he wasn't feeling too well. After almost two and a half hours on this side of the mirror, the mild electrical vibration that accompanied this foray through the glass now seemed more insistent and somewhat unpleasant.

Later, unable to sleep, Craig had some more ideas that he wanted to put down on tape but then he realized that he had left the recorder with Billy. He decided on impulse that while Billy slept, he would go downstairs without waking him, retrieve the recorder, or if he couldn't find that one, borrow the other one from the drawer.

When he popped his head through the glass he was surprised to see that Billy wasn't in his bed. Coming out of his room he stood at the top of the stairs.

"Billy, are you there?"

He started to move down the stairs, a little unnerved by the darkness and the silence.

"Billy, I need the recorder, are you there?"

Then he heard a voice speaking from the darkness. It didn't take long to recognize his own taped voice, though in this setting it sounded eerie instead of reassuring.

He didn't know where the recorder was located but what he could see, with the aid of street lighting, was a figure standing behind the armchair reaching out to switch on the table lamp. Fear mounted as the light suddenly revealed Billy sitting on the armchair unable to move because of a knife held at his throat.

Behind him, keeping the knife in position, stood the now almost unrecognisable figure of Colin. He switched off the tape and said, “Well, well, well, look what we have here, a visitor! Why use the front door when you can use the mirror, eh? Listen up, young Craig ... Don’t even think about running back up those stairs, if you want to continue seeing this newfound brother of yours. Keep walking all the way down and make yourself comfortable over there on the sofa.”

Colin sat himself down between Billy on the armchair and Craig on the sofa and grinned at both of them. Waving his knife in the air for emphasis, he said, “Boy, did I come to the right house! I don’t know what made me think of switching on that tape recorder, perhaps it was out of boredom when I realized that there was nothing worth taking, or maybe it was because my old friend here wasn’t around for a chat. It’s not easy finding someone to talk to ... when everybody wants to put you away!”

When he had finished pointing the knife in Billy’s direction, he redirected it towards the tape recorder on the coffee table and then continued, “And they all thought I was crazy! What I didn’t know then but know now, thanks to that tape and some gentle persuasion on Billy here, is where the two worlds meet. Being a Science Fiction writer, it didn’t take me long to realize there’s a good story with a happy ending in this. Let me lay it out for you. On this side they only want to lock me up and throw away the key, so it would make sense that I make my exit through that mirror upstairs to a world where I’m not on a wanted list. But, someone stands in the way ... Me! Or should I say ... that other me through the glass. While he’s alive I’m stuck here. Ask yourself, who would be the best person to commit a murder? Yes, that’s right ... someone who doesn’t exist over there and that would be ... our friend Billy over here!”

Billy stood up with his fist clenched and raised his voice, “If you think I’m going to go over to the other side to kill somebody ... You’re sadly mistaken!”

Colin waved the knife in front of Billy’s face and said, “Sit down. NOW!”

Billy had no option but to obey.

“Who’s the author here, you or me? Do you think I haven’t made allowance for that scenario?”

Catch this ... while you’re through there dealing with my unwanted twin, I’m holding Craig right here until you’ve completed the job. If I don’t get access to that other world, you

will be mourning this brother all over again ... DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

Colin sighed and shook his head at the same time, "See ... you made me angry, I don't like it when I get angry. To show you that I can forgive, I'm going to give you three hours instead of only two, as I originally planned. That should be enough time to both kill and dispose of my other half. I would suggest that you go now. Time flies and I don't want you holding up my happy ending, do I?"

Billy looked at Craig with the saddest expression before heading up the stairs. Craig shouted after him, "Be careful, Billy!"

When Billy had gone, Craig looked at Colin and said, "What I can't figure out is why Colin on that side is such a nice guy and you are such a bastard!"

Instead of reacting to what he had just been called, Colin closed his eyes and grinned. With his eyes still shut he said, "Come on Craig, you're being a little harsh ... you don't even know me."

Craig decided that if he was about to die, then he wouldn't go quietly.

"What makes you think you can fit in on that side any better than you did here? After all, going over there isn't a cure for craziness!"

The smile dropped for a second as he opened his eyes then closed them again.

"Wouldn't you say that trying to irritate someone holding a knife is a kind of craziness?"

Craig decided to see how much he could find out by keeping him talking. Perhaps something he said might be of use.

"So what do you intend to do once you get over to the other side?"

This time he opened his eyes and looked at Craig, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Well, just think of it for a minute, Craig. The opportunities are endless. Let's say I rob a bank on this side and make my exit to the other ... I've got it made! I can do whatever I like here ... as long as I don't get caught in the act."

"Why did you kill Father McBride?"

This time he had hit a nerve and he started to tremble, as the man sprung to his feet. It looked like a battle was raging inside him and Craig wondered if he had gone too far.

"He was just like all the rest, he wouldn't listen to me."

Then he seemed to get some control of himself, “Get over here near the television so that I can keep an eye on you and don’t say another word about that ... or ... you won’t be here when he gets back.”

Craig decided it was better to let him be for a while; he had already made the mistake of playing with fire.

Muttering something under his breath, Colin shook his head a couple of times, then flicked through the channels until he found something that appealed to him; a movie about a haunted house, not something that Craig wanted to watch this particular night but he had no choice in the matter. So he waited and watched with dread as the deadline drew even closer.

Craig wondered what would happen if he were murdered on this side. As far as the police or anybody else knew, he didn’t exist here, so how could they try a psychiatric patient for murdering a person who was already officially dead? What would his own parent think when they came back to an empty house? It had been hard enough for them losing one son but losing both would be more than they could handle.

As Billy had noticed much earlier, the internal vibration was getting stronger and he was starting to feel a little nauseous. He asked if he could go to the toilet. Colin, irritated by being distracted from the movie, reluctantly followed him up the stairs and waited.

Craig wanted to be sick but nothing would come up. As he looked into the mirror he noticed how pale he had become. Colin’s voice outside the door startled him, “Come on, for God’s sake, what’s keeping you in there?”

They returned to their positions downstairs and Colin settled into watching the movie again.

With thirty minutes to spare, they were both startled when they saw Billy coming back down the stairs, also looking a ghostly white. Colin switched off the television and said, “Well, have you done the deed I sent you to do? For your brother’s sake ... I hope you have. Let’s all go up together and see ... ”

“I’m sorry, Colin, I couldn’t find him. You need to give me more time.”

“You didn’t have enough time. How much time do you need, Billy? A week? A month? Or maybe a whole friggin’ year?” He screwed his eyes up and waved the knife under Billy’s nose. “Somehow I don’t think you’re taking this seriously enough. Sit on the sofa, I want to show you something.”

Billy did as he was told and then, in what seemed like a moment's explosive action, Colin crossed the room, grabbed a handful of Craig's hair, and pulled him out of the armchair. Moving backwards, he put the knife against the boy's throat.

Billy could only watch in horror as the man stood near the foot of the stairs with his pale and trembling hostage. And then he spoke, "I want you to see what happens when you don't keep to the plot. I'm going to have to cut him ... but you make the decision where. OK?"

"Don't hurt him, Colin."

"If ... I give you a second chance to go back through there. Find him and do the job ... will you let me down again?"

"Please ... I'm begging you. Don't hurt him ... I'll do what you want."

"That's good news Billy, but who's to say that you won't try to pull something on me. No, I need to give you something else to think about when you go through there. A little blood-letting will help focus your attention ... so, again ... where should I cut him?"

Craig watched through tears as his brother tried to speak but the words wouldn't come out. Colin started up again, "Looks like I'm going to have to decide."

The hand that held Craig's hair loosened its grip but the knife hand had moved away from his throat. Craig closed his eyes not wanting to see what would happen next.

"YOU WON'T TOUCH THE BOY!"

The unmistakable voice of Father McBride emanated like a roar from the background, almost making Craig jump out of his skin. And he quickly realized that it must have had the same affect on Colin, as he felt the grip on his hair loosen immediately.

A struggle ensued, causing the knife to shoot out of Colin's hand and slide across the wooden floor. That gave Craig enough time to get out of the way and move towards his brother. The priest, still with the advantage of surprise, pushed Colin onto the floor.

The look on the man's face as he tried to recover from the shock of seeing the priest standing over him was beyond words.

"McBride!"

"Father McBride, if you don't mind."

The priest then looked at Billy and Craig and said, "you two boys, get up the stairs now and through to the other side. Wait for me ... " Colin started to get up " ... and you can just stay where you are," the priest added.

The two boys, looking pale and sickly, did as they were told.

Colin attempted a recovery when he spoke but there was no hiding the ashen pallor of his skin and the tremble of his hand.

"I've got no business with you, priest. It'd be better if you went back to where you came from."

"I'll go back when I'm good and ready but first I have to convince you that there will be no vacancies for you on the other side."

"And who's going to stop me?"

The priest made a show of looking around, "I don't see anyone else here."

Colin physically wouldn't have been able to overpower the priest; a more powerfully built man but from where he sat on the floor, he could see where the knife had ended its journey and speed was on his side.

He was already an arms-length away from the weapon when the priest, realizing too late what he was doing, attempted to tackle him. The struggle that ensued brought the knife within Colin's grasp and he struck blindly behind him.

Through the other side of the mirror Craig, Billy and Colin awaited the priest's return.

Craig said, "Would someone explain to me how Father McBride got involved?"

Colin spoke up, "That was your brother's idea. He called me from here to tell me what was going on and asked me to go straight to Father McBride's house. I had to try to explain the whole situation to him. And ... as you can imagine, it took some convincing. But ... the old devil isn't as dogmatic as I thought he would be. Then Billy remembered reading a newspaper article about the events leading up to and after the death of the priest. The other ... me, had been screaming out the priest's name and begging for forgiveness when they took him away in the police van. The idea came to Billy that the only person who might stand a chance of stopping him would be ... another Father McBride, but this time, our priest would be more prepared ... hopefully."

Their conversation trailed off as they realized that there was still no sign of the priest returning from the other side to confirm that everything was under control. Then Craig voiced the fear that they all shared.

"What if he does it again? I mean ... what if he has two Father McBrides on his conscience now?"

"I'm going to have to go back through."

"But you can't, Billy ... what if he's waiting for you?"

“Colin can’t go and I’m a little bigger than you Craig. Don’t worry. Look, with the aid of your baseball bat, I’ll be ready for him.”

“If you’re going to do this,” Colin said, “try to keep yourself in a position that gives you access back to the mirror and don’t let him block your exit ... OK?”

Baseball bat in hand, Billy cautiously crossed over to the other side, silently opening his bedroom door and crouching down at the top of the stairs. He could see the priest on the floor holding his side and an unmistakable red patch whenever he moved his hand. Only just visible, Colin appeared from time to time, pacing back and forward, with the knife in his hand.

And then the priest spoke, “Colin, you don’t know what you’re doing. There are a couple of good reasons why you can’t go over there. The other Colin is alive and well and hopefully nothing is going to change that for some time to come. The other reason was right in front of your eyes earlier but you didn’t see it. Those boys’ are sick and do you know why? I’ll tell you ... being in the wrong parallel universe too long makes them ill and, using the same logic, longer periods of time might even kill them.”

“SHUT UP!”

“What are you going to do Colin, finish me off just like the other Father McBride? Aren’t you suffering enough for what you’ve done?”

Colin, now in tears, half spoke, half shouted, “He wouldn’t ... LISTEN TO ME! I wanted you ... him to understand ... but you just kept TALKING AND TALKING!”

Colin was becoming more confused with each passing minute and started pacing more erratically. The priest suddenly changed tactics, perhaps realizing before it was too late, that provocation wasn’t the answer.

“You’re right, Colin, I didn’t listen to you. That’s a mistake we sometimes make when we don the cloth. We’re so full of the ready-made answers we learn in college that we forget to ... listen. I’m sure you really didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

Billy could see Colin standing over the priest now with the knife, still in his hand. He seemed to sway a little and then lower himself into a crouching position. The boy’s heart was racing in his chest as he realized that it might be now or never. With the element of surprise on his side, he might be able to come down the stairs at full speed and strike Colin with the baseball bat. He was just about to put the plan into action when the priest looked up and saw him.

Colin, now in tears started mumbling, "I only wanted you ... to ... listen to me. Just a little while."

"I know what you've been going through. You did nothing wrong in telling people what you believe but ... hurting them to make them listen ... isn't the way to gain their understanding."

Colin wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket and that gave the priest just enough time to signal with a shake of the head and mouthing a silent no against any action Billy might take.

"You stopped loving God, Colin but He hasn't stopped loving you. And now it's time for you to ask for His forgiveness."

Great sobs of grief escaped the man as he nodded his head in agreement.

"Now give me the knife, Colin, you don't need it."

For one scary moment Billy thought that Colin might flip out of control again and give the priest the sharp end. That didn't happen. Instead he turned the knife around ... and handed it to Father McBride.

"I'm sorry, Father. I didn't mean to do those bad things."

"Colin, you know that you have to go back to the hospital until you're well again. You don't object to that, do you?"

"No, Father."

"Billy is going to phone the hospital now and have them come to collect you. But ... I need you to promise me something and God is our witness. You must never tell a living soul about what went on in this house tonight and also ... you must never speak again about other dimensions. If you do, they will make you spend the rest of your life in care. These events must remain a secret between you and God."

Colin looked up with tear-stained eyes and said, "I promise."

After Billy had phoned the hospital and Father McBride assured him that his wound wasn't a deep one, he sat in silence while the priest and Colin prayed together. The unmistakable sound of a vehicle pulling up outside was the signal for the priest to wait upstairs until Colin had been taken away. Then, they both made their exit through the mirror.

Craig and Colin simultaneously let out a sigh of relief as Billy and Father McBride stepped through the glass. Colin was the first to speak, "I never thought I'd be so happy to see a man in a dog-collar!"

The priest grinned and said, "Well that means there's hope for you yet ... you old heathen."

And then he noticed the blood on the priest's shirt. "Good God, you're bleeding, Andrew! We need to get you to a hospital right away."

"Don't worry, it's only a minor cut ... probably looks worse than it is."

He pulled up his shirt to reveal a wound that fortunately wasn't a deep one. Craig went down the stairs to get the first-aid box and while they recounted the events on the other side, the priest was patched up in next to no time.

Colin winked at Craig and said, "Yes, we're fortunate that Colin over there responded to a bit of old fashioned Christian guilt and a few well-chosen words from our Father here ... "

Father McBride interrupted, "I think I've proved that my Christian views are a bit more progressive than that Colin. I'm sure a true believer in the church of science like yourself would have to agree that we're all out of our depths on this one. The big question we will have to think long and hard about is ... should we let the world outside know what's going on in here? It opens a whole set of possibilities, apart from its affect on religion and science."

Colin put his hand on his friend's shoulder and said, "Sorry, Andrew, I'm making light of a situation that calls for serious thought. It's just my way of letting off some nervous energy."

"No offence taken. I guess even in a situation as bizarre as this one, there's still room for humour."

The conversation stalled with the realization of the responsibility that now faced all four of them.

Colin broke the silence, "We've already seen how it might be misused if the sickness is controlled."

Andrew added, "Who is there to trust with this? What if there are even more portals being explored as we speak? It may already be out of our hands. There are so many questions that need answers. Tomorrow is a brand new day in more ways than one and we have some important decisions to make."

Craig noticed that Billy was starting to look sickly again.

"Billy, you look as if you need to spend some time on your own side. I'll come to see you first thing in the morning."

Billy nodded in agreement, shook hands with Father McBride and Colin and gave his brother a hug before stepping though.

Later, as Craig watched Colin and Father McBride walking down the driveway to their cars, he put aside thoughts of what the future might bring. The first thing he had to discuss with Billy in the morning would be how they were going to tell their

respective parents. He hoped that after the initial shock, they would find a way to live with something that had to remain a secret; both sets of parents getting a second chance to celebrate their lost boys coming home.

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