

The Mirror's Companion  
by Janelle Wing

We have designated the bathroom as her room. Every morning and afternoon she spends hours talking to the mirror. Her reflection laughs at her jokes and she chuckles in return. Rarely does she bother to look at one of us when we approach, and if the door is closed, it means she is busy telling secrets.

The shelves in the bathroom are cluttered with treasured ornaments. On the shelf sits a toy my son acquired from his McDonald's Happy Meal last week. She must have found it and snuck it into the room with her. There is no doubt that she held up the prize in the mirror and smiled cheerfully and talked enthusiastically about how fantastic a find it was. My son will never miss the toy, but when I notice it sitting on the shelf I wonder if she would miss it. Ultimately she wouldn't notice, but I don't have the heart to take away the only things she has left to care about.

The morning had started as a mess. It was 7:43 and I was supposed to be leaving for work in seventeen minutes, but my brother hadn't yet woken up and she had not gotten out of bed. My son, Andrew, had been crying all morning and my husband was working late so I had to quickly drop him off at the baby-sitter's before work.

As I gathered Andrew in my arms, I ran upstairs and found her in the fetal position without blankets over her slender frame. I could feel the chill in the house and when I touched her pale cheek it was cold under my fingers.

"Damn you Eric." I whispered under my breath so not to wake her up too abruptly. She was easily frightened in the morning, and always woke up slightly disoriented. I rubbed her shoulder gently and stepped back a few paces so she wouldn't feel like someone was hovering over her.

When she opened her eyes, she jumped slightly and then rolled over so she was facing me. I smiled and bounced Andrew on my hip so he wouldn't start crying again. "Hey," I said sweetly. "It's time to get up." I backed up a few more steps and she slowly sat up. I waited for a few moments until she started to stand before I walked out of the room and towards Eric's room.

I banged on the door furiously. He had no consideration for other people, especially in the morning when he had stayed out late. There was a long pause and no answer, so I flung the door open as wide and as obnoxiously as I could muster. One of the bodies in the bed stirred slightly and pulled the blankets up closer around their body before lying still again. I walked closer to the side of the bed and saw that Kayla had again spent the night. I hit Andrew on the shoulder with my fist. He jerked his eyes open, closed them quickly, and then opened them again as if hoping when he did I wouldn't be there.

"What?" He said finally, looking as put out as if I'd just drank his last beer.

"Get up, right now." I hated so much acting like I was his mom, but he seemed to forget too often that he had responsibilities and it always seemed to fall on me to remind him.

"Jeez, can't a guy get some sleep around here, Anna." He almost rolled over again, but there was no way I was going to leave her in the house alone, wandering aimlessly. Only the week before, I'd gotten home from work to find her in the backyard. She had never been allowed in the backyard, but Eric had forgotten to lock the door and didn't here the door shut when she exited the kitchen. I was still bitter.

"Look, I have to get to work and drop Andrew off at the sitter's. I don't have time to get her ready or get her breakfast. I'm already running late so you'll have to take care of her." My voice was getting louder the longer I spoke, but I knew Eric wouldn't get up unless I stood there and waited to see him physically get out of bed.

"I'll be down in a minute." Eric tried to roll over again, but I grabbed his shoulder before he had the chance.

"No, you won't. You won't get up until noon if I just leave right now. Then she'll be God knows where and I'll probably get a call at work that some neighbor found her wandering the streets. Then I'll have to apologize for the fact that my incompetent brother doesn't know what he's doing and that it will never happen again."

"How dare you call me incompetent Anna." He ripped the blankets back and practically lunged at me as he got out of the bed. Kayla stirred then and rolled over to see Eric looking furiously in my direction.

I realized then that I was too tired to have the same argument again and decided it wasn't

worth goading him about. “Please, just take care of her Eric. If I’m late again, I’m screwed.”

“Don’t you run the damn store? I thought you were in charge or something.” Even though he was still trying to fight me on the topic, he was rummaging around in his closet for some pants to put on over his boxers.

“I still have a boss Eric, and she is only so sympathetic towards our situation.” I knew my words would mean little more than nothing to him, and at that moment he turned toward the door and strode to the bathroom down the hall. I strode from the room with as much as control as I could muster and practically sprinted down the stairs. It was 7:56 by the time I made it out the door with Andrew’s coat and diaper bag and my lunch for work. The whole drive to the sitter’s house I couldn’t get the fact that I hadn’t really seen Eric go downstairs out of my head. For all I knew he was still in bed while she waited for someone to help get ready, go to the bathroom and eat.

I arrived five minutes late for work which wasn’t too bad. All morning I went from being angry to trying to push it out of my head. I tried to hide my frustration from everyone at work, but eventually, when my boss finally came in at one and asked me why I had been so quiet I couldn’t hide it any longer.

“You seem a little off today. What’s going on?” Nikki was really good at getting to the point, and while sometimes she needed subtlety, this time wasn’t one of them.

I sighed deeply, knowing that the story would get me all worked up again. I felt tears welling up in my eyes as I told her, and I soon realized that I wouldn’t be able to do this every morning. “I just can’t take Eric anymore. Ever since he got Kayla pregnant, he’s been acting as if he’s the only person who’s ever had it rough. He screwed up and now he has to deal with it, but he hasn’t taken responsibility yet.”

Nikki looked sad for me for a moment, but then quickly shifted to her angry side. I assumed she thought it would make me feel better if she cussed about my brother while I nodded unenthusiastically, but instead I felt a sort of need to defend his behavior, even though I knew every word coming out of Nikki’s mouth was correct.

After a few minutes I stepped out onto the sales floor of my Hallmark store and began to act the way an assistant manager should. As I rubbed my itchy eyes, I realized I couldn’t let

something that happened at my house five hours ago affect the way I treated the customers in the store and I wouldn't let it affect the morale of my coworkers. The day progressed slowly, but by five o'clock I was ready for the silent drive home. I needed time to think and I needed time to calm down for when I faced Eric, and certainly Kayla, when I got home.

I picked up Andrew on the way home and tried to call my husband John before I arrived. I was nervous for what John would say when we talked. I hoped that when John got home at twelve that afternoon, she would have been taken care of. John wouldn't bother to wake Eric up if he wasn't already, and instead would just take care of her until Eric finally decided to climb out of bed.

"Hello?" John answered sounding disoriented and groggy. I had obviously just woken him up.

"Sorry babe, I was just wondering how she was doing?" I knew I sounded apprehensive, because when John spoke it was with a soothing voice.

"She's fine. I got home this morning and Eric was just coming downstairs. She was already in the kitchen and hadn't used the bathroom yet, so Eric took her in her room to do that and then got her some cereal. I figured she would be okay since Eric was up and about. I can go check on her now if you'd like."

"No, it's ok. I'm almost home anyhow. I just wanted to make sure that Eric had gotten up this morning. Most mornings Stella's there, but one morning a week he has to get up and take care of her, and he can't even manage to do that." My face felt warm and I could feel my emotions building up. "I had a fight with him about it. I just wish he wasn't such an ass about the whole situation. He's only been home for a few months and he's already knocked some girl up and doesn't even help around the house."

There was a small sigh on the other end of the line, and I realized John and I talked more about my slacker of a brother than our own lives. Finally he spoke again, though I knew he was just as frustrated as me. "Look, we can't change Eric. We just have to learn to deal with him and hopefully he'll come around."

I nodded to myself and tried to relax. I glanced in my rearview to see Andrew dozing in the car seat and felt myself lighten a little. At least we had a beautiful little boy that made us happy. “I know. Did you get a chance to clean the apartment?”

John continued talking while I began to think about the living situation we were currently in. While living in my parents’ backyard wasn’t exactly the life I had dreamed of, it was nice to be close to my dad when he needed help. The apartment was cramped, but since it was just the three of us it sufficed. I kept telling myself it was only a short term plan and that eventually we would have our own home to live in, and it seemed to ease the frustration when things became overwhelming.

I talked to John about dinner and the chores that needed to get done until I pulled into the driveway. When I got Andrew out I started towards my parents’ house to see if Eric was still home. If he wasn’t, I knew I was going to be incensed all over again.

I flung open the door in the kitchen and found her sitting at the table by herself. The TV was on and though she was staring at the screen she looked confused at what was happening.

“Hi there,” I waited to see if she would turn to look in my direction and when she did she gave the slightest of smiles. “Is Eric here?” I knew there was a chance she wouldn’t know who I was talking about, but I often asked questions like those to see if she was having the occasional good day or not.

“Oh no, Robert gave me daffodils today. He knew they were my favorite.” Her smile shifted and she got up and headed for the bathroom. It often made me want to cry when I heard her say my father’s name with such adoration, when she couldn’t recognize his face now.

I watched her walk into the bathroom and begin talking at the mirror. I screamed for Eric and when he didn’t come I placed Andrew in his pack and play and headed upstairs. By the time I reached Eric’s bedroom I could hear muffled noises from behind the door. I didn’t hesitate in throwing open the door. I had already been polite that morning.

Kayla was sitting in a chair in the corner, eating a bowl of cereal with her pajamas still on. Eric was quickly pulling on pants, rubbing his eyes vigorously.

“Are you kidding me? How dare you leave her down there all by herself all day! Do you have no consideration for anyone else but yourself?” I felt the words falling from my mouth before I could even process them.

“Shut up Anna! You act as if you’re the only person around here who cares about her. I do my best and then I move on. You don’t have to sit all day with her and watch her slowly lose more and more of herself. You get to runaway every morning and leave her to someone else!”

I was speechless and felt as if my fists were going to fly uncontrollably towards his body. “I would never leave her if I didn’t have to Eric. You’ve lived here for two months and you’re already bitching? She’s our Mother for God’s sake!”

Eric suddenly shrunk and his body seemed to release every bit of tension he was withholding. “No she’s not Anna. Not anymore.”

I realized then that Eric was not willing to put in the effort to help our mom. Her Alzheimer’s had progressed quickly since five years ago, but the doctor had insisted we give her familiar faces whenever possible and talk to her as if she knew what we were saying. He had assured us that there would be good days and bad days that would soon progress solely to bad days. It was now a miracle if she had a good day where she could remember just one person she saw.

Her nurse, Stella, came three mornings a week, John took one morning, and Eric was supposed to take the last. Eric had promised he would help take care of our mom when he moved back in after breaking the news that he was expecting a child with a nineteen year old. Eric was twenty-one and had no idea how hard his life was going to be once he had a child of his own to take care of.

When I talked to my dad about Eric’s lack of commitment and responsibility, we both decided it would be best to put my mom in an adult day care center. Every morning, someone would drop her off and she would be watched all day long by trained professionals. I felt that the set up would be a lot less stressful for the entire family, and we could just use the money we were paying Stella three days a week to get mom into the facility.

The first few weeks she was in the program it felt like we’d finally found the perfect arrangement for the family. My dad, who then had started a new job to earn extra money for my

mom's care, had crazy hours. Since he wouldn't be home as much as before he had given my brother the responsibility to get up and take mom to the day care in the morning when my dad or I wasn't available. My dad threatened Eric into it by telling him if he didn't, he would have to find another place to live.

Kayla was already four months along and not willing to work, so they had no choice but to abide by what my dad said. It was probably the smallest amount of effort they could contribute to the household, but at least it was something.

I had decided to talk to my brother as little as possible. Whenever we did talk it seemed as though it always ended in a fight, and I had become so tired of arguing that I just avoided being in his presence as much as possible.

About a month after we had started my mom in the program I was at work and received a call from the facility's head nurse.

"Anna, who was supposed to drop your mom off today?" My heart dropped to my feet and suddenly a million images were pounding against my eyes. She could be anywhere, wandering aimlessly on the streets, wondering where she was and how she had gotten there. What if someone had found her and decided to take advantage of her? So many things could happen to a woman who had no idea who she was and what she was doing there.

I tried to regain my focus towards the woman talking to me on the other line. "My brother was supposed to drop her off. Did he not show up?"

The nurse sighed deeply. "Yes Anna, he dropped her off. It's just that she's not cleaned up."

I couldn't understand at first what she meant. My father and I had given her a shower the night before. When I had left that morning she was still sleeping so she couldn't have gotten into too much of a mess. "What do you mean 'not cleaned up'?"

"She has fecies in her hair and on her clothes. When your brother dropped her off, he walked her up to the door and then left before we could stop him. We can't keep her here like this Anna. It's not good for the other adults to be around this type of thing." She paused for a moment before continuing on. "I have to ask you to come and pick her up as soon as possible."

Tears filled my eyes and began streaming down my cheeks. My mother was covered in filth and no one seemed to care except me.

“Anna? Are you still there?” The nurse’s voice startled me, and I had yet to come up with a way to get to the facility without causing too much of a dilemma for everyone at work.

“Yes, I’m still here. Look, I’ll call my brother and see if he can pick her up. If he can’t then I’ll leave work to come and get her. I will try and get there as soon as I can.”

“Anna, we’d prefer that you come. Obviously your brother is incapable of taking care of your mother in the way we find sufficient, and I really would rather he doesn’t come back to our facility again.”

I had no other choice but to leave work immediately and go and retrieve my mother. There was no one that was going to be able to take care of her for the rest of the day except Eric, and there was no way I was going to leave her with him again. I felt overwhelming sadness and frustration as I hung up the phone and headed for the front of the store to leave.

I was astonished that someone would be able to do this to a stranger, much less our own mother. It was true that she wasn’t the mother we used to know who used to love us and know us and make us dinner at night. She was in a sense a stranger, but my love for her had never changed and never would. As long as I could remember the way she used to be, I could love her.

When I reached the adult day care I scrambled out of my car and into the building. I felt an overbearing need to see my mother and to try and console her. At the front desk they ushered me into a room separated from the rest of the adults where my mother and the nurse I talked to on the phone were sitting. My mother was talking about her trip to Cancun twenty years ago, but then quickly switched to watching the small TV in the corner absentmindedly.

The nurse approached me, with a trace of sympathy in her round face. “I’m sorry about this Anna, but our rules are our rules. We just can’t have this.”

“Don’t be sorry. I can’t have this either. I don’t know exactly what to do, but I’ll figure something out.” There was nothing else for me to say except that my brother was an idiot and didn’t give a damn about what happened to my mother anymore.

“It seems to me that your brother needs to make a decision about whether he’s willing to help keep your mom alive or not.” The nurse frowned slightly in my direction. No one had yet

put it in so many words, though I knew that was exactly what the battle with him entailed. There was a certain part of him that did not care whether our mother lived or died, but instead of acting as though he was heartless, he pretended he didn't know better. In the end what it all boiled down to was that he wasn't fighting for my mom to live.

"I've run out of options in that area. I have probably told him a thousand times what needs to take place to keep my mother well, but he seems apathetic. The only reason he does half of what we tell him is because my dad said he would kick him and his girlfriend out of it they didn't. There's nothing left I can say to convince him he's wrong."

The nurse looked at the floor and then up at me. "Alzheimer's is rough for a family. I think it could possibly be the worst way a person could go through life. I've seen tons of families with relatives that had Alzheimer's, and well, they all suffered a bit differently. Maybe your brother is just dealing with your mom's prognosis differently and instead of embracing her, is just trying to push her away."

I nodded vaguely because I barely took in any of the words she was saying. There was a possibility that Eric was acting irresponsible because he didn't want to deal with the fact that our mom was losing her mind, but there was also the chance that I was hoping too much for some sort of miracle. My mom was never going to be normal again, and she would never remember my face or my son's. Eric wasn't right, but I probably wasn't either.

"Anna, your family will be ok. Everyone ends up ok. It's just a very large adjustment for people when the person that always took care of them has to be taken care of." The nurse looked at me as if she understood the turmoil I was feeling inside, but I knew she couldn't possibly understand that it wasn't about my mom's illness so much as it was about trying, just trying.

"Well thanks, for taking care of her until I got here. I suppose I'll be dropping her off from now on then." I grabbed my purse and was heading for the door with my mother by my side when the nurse called my name again.

"Eric can drop her off. But if this happens again, I'm going to call police. He needs to know people can't live like this, and it's endangerment for him to bring her here in this disarray."

I'm hoping you'll explain to him the best you can the risk he is creating for her and everyone else."

I nodded again and headed out of the building as fast as I could go while holding my mother's hand. She waved vaguely at the receptionist as we walked out, but the receptionist was too busy to wave back.

"Well, I think she was a little rude, don't you?" My mother said as we walked from the building. I nodded again and got her into the car quickly.

The whole drive home I could barely form complete thoughts through the anger I was feeling. Eric had done the ultimate disservice to everyone in our family, and I didn't know if I would be able to face him. My mom played with the radio dials all the way home, switching from some country station that she shook her head at, to an oldies station that had her smiling serenely.

Eric was sitting on the porch when I pulled into the driveway. I walked my mother into the house without looking at him, though I knew he was gazing in my direction. It took me half an hour to get her all cleaned up and afterwards I put her in bed. She climbed into bed willingly and when I pulled the covers up over her shoulders she squeezed my hand quickly before rolling over to face the wall.

When I knew my mom was safe and taken care of, I went to find Eric. He was no longer sitting on the front porch, but instead I found him wandering in the backyard, smoking a cigarette. I approached him aggressively, hoping I would be able to control my anger long enough to explain to him the situation. I stood next to him and waited to see if he would mention anything first.

"I'm sorry Anna. I don't know what I was thinking. The phone has been ringing all morning, and I knew it was the center. I knew there was no way to forgive what I had done. I couldn't show my face there after this." He took another long puff and then threw the cigarette on the ground. He buried it with his foot, using more force than was necessary.

I hadn't expected him to apologize for his behavior, but I had expected that he would feel some sort of remorse. "They'll call the police if it happens again." They were the words I knew would put the most fear into him.

“They’ll take her away from us.” He said it as if it was already going to happen. In that moment I felt the most guilt I had ever experienced. I imagined just for a moment what my life would be like if she was taken from us. My father would be devastated and we’d all suffer from a great loss, but there would also be a sense of relief.

“They won’t take her today. Just no more of this, Eric.” I walked away slowly, leaving him in the yard with his head hung low. There was chance he would change and everything would work out as planned, but I knew I shouldn’t hope for too much.

For the rest of the day I spent my time cleaning the house and making dinner for the whole family. John had been in bed all day and when he woke up to find me in the house I was forced to explain everything that happened.

He had been so angry at first that he almost packed up Eric’s belongings himself and heaved them into the front yard. I eventually calmed him down, but he still refused to speak to him over dinner. I had picked up Andrew early in the afternoon so I spent some time with him and my mother, trying to get her to say his name. She didn’t ever get it, but she did find him mildly amusing.

After dinner was cleaned up, John and I took Andrew to our apartment and settled him down for bed. My brother had decided he would put our mom to bed, and though I hesitated, I somehow knew I had to give him the chance to prove he was capable.

When John and I finally fell into our bed, he apologized for not helping more with the house that day, and for getting so angry with Eric.

“It’s ok. I think Eric really felt bad. Maybe his biggest fear with our mom is having her taken away. If it is, then he’ll take better care of her. I won’t deny he screwed up, but maybe this was the last straw for him to really get the point.”

“If he doesn’t get it, we’ll have to do something drastic to get him away from her. We can’t take that chance with her, not again.” John hugged me a little tighter and then leaned back so he could see my face.

“What is your biggest fear when it comes to your mom?” His face was screwed up in concentration, trying to figure out what I was thinking.

I knew exactly what my biggest fear was, but had never spoken the words out loud. “My fear is that I won’t recognize Andrew one day. That when he’s busy having children, I’ll be busy wondering about things no one understands. I’m scared that when I see your face I will forget the life we spent together.” I thought for a few more minutes before going on. “I’m worried too that one day, Andrew will have to go through the same pain that my mom goes through everyday.”

I had no idea if in twenty years I would understand if my son was getting married or having kids, or whether I’d recognize his wife and children. I feared the day when I would become my mother.