

# Handprints on the Mirror

By Scott Cimarusti

“Whose handprints are these?”

Sarah Carlson rolled her eyes. She knew that if she didn't immediately rush to witness Jeffrey's latest crisis and pretend to care about it as much as he did, he would continue to shout inquiries and accusations in frustrated disbelief throughout the house.

With a sigh, she put down her book and followed his voice into the dining room, where she found her husband of over five years standing in front of the antique full-length mirror that hung on the wall opposite their china cabinet. He whirled to face her, his eyes accusing. His arm shot out in the direction of the mirror; specifically, the offending handprints at about shoulder-level.

“Have you seen this?”

She shook her head slowly, trying her best to feign concern. “No, I didn't.”

“Are they yours?”

Now she had to fight to stifle a giggle. He sounded like he was addressing a puppy that had piddled on the rug. “I don't think so, Jeffrey... If they are, I'm—”

“Well they're certainly not MINE. They MUST be yours. It's just the two of us in this house...” His eyes narrowed. “Do you realize that this is an antique, handed down from my mother?”

Despite her attempt to control her tone, Sarah could hear the condescension sneaking into her voice as her smile became more strained. “I'll go get the Windex and we'll clean it right up.”

“That's not the point. If you're not going to respect—”

Her patience now exhausted, her words darted out from between gritted teeth. “Look, Jeffrey, I don't recall doing so, but if I accidentally left handprints on your precious antique mirror, I apologize. As I said, I'll go get the Windex, and in about twenty seconds, it'll be as good as new. OK?”

Refusing to be placated, Jeffrey continued to stare at her incredulously for several seconds before marching past her into the kitchen. “Never mind.”

Sarah threw up her hands and exited the room. “Fine.”

She stormed back to the sitting room and her favorite chair by the window to resume her book. She didn't know why she was so annoyed by his behavior; he had always been like this about that damned mirror.

About three months into their marriage, Jeffrey's mother, who'd been widowed for many years, passed away—a sudden and unexplained death—and she had left the mirror to Jeffrey, her only child. Sarah knew Jeffrey had been close to his mother, but something about the woman had always made Sarah uneasy.

When they first got the mirror, Sarah had marveled at its magnificence. At about four feet wide and almost six feet tall, set in an ornate gilded frame, it was a beautiful addition to their modest home. But when she saw how obsessed Jeffrey was about keeping it spotless—dusting and polishing it twice a day, before and after work—she knew it was going to be more trouble than it was worth. Lucky for him, there were no children in the house to tarnish his beloved mirror with their curious and exploring hands. In fact, that's what the mirror had come to represent to her now; a cold, stark reminder that there might never be children to mar its pristine perfection.

Still fuming, Sarah continued to stare at her book, her eyes roving over the same sentence several times, unable to comprehend its meaning. What was it about that accursed mirror that made Jeffrey place it above everything and everyone else in his life—including her and her desire to have a family?

Suddenly too angry to even see straight, let alone read, Sarah threw her book down and marched out of the house into the September sunshine—slamming the door behind her for good measure. Maybe a walk around the block (or even the state) would cool her off.

In the kitchen, Jeffrey heard his wife storm out. “Good riddance,” he mumbled to the empty house. He jerked open the cabinet under the sink and snatched the bottle of Windex before unspooling an excessive amount of paper towels from the roll above the sink—the good paper towels; not those cheap, budget brands that Sarah was always trying to buy in an attempt to save a few pennies.

He strode back into the dining room, Windex clasped in one fist, the wad of paper towels in the other. He looked like a gunslinger advancing down a dusty street, his eyes focused on his adversary—in this case, the brazen handprints on his beloved mirror.

Making sure he was a safe distance from the glass, as dictated by the label on the bottle, and using the handful of paper towels to help shield the rest of the mirror from the stream, he squeezed off two quick bursts of glass cleaner—one on each handprint. Then quickly setting the bottle down on the floor—before the Windex could drip

any further down the mirror and smear the remaining flawlessly polished surface—he proceeded to gingerly wipe away the handprints in small, precise circles.

But when he pulled his hand away to behold the newly restored mirror, his eyes narrowed.

The handprints were still there.

He picked up the Windex again, this time spraying more liberal amounts in a six-inch radius around the marred area, and following up with more vigorous wiping.

Still, the handprints remained.

Fuming, Jeffrey then proceeded to saturate the mirror with half the contents of the bottle. No longer concerned about the Windex dripping down the rest of mirror, he resigned himself to spending the rest of the afternoon polishing the whole thing, if necessary, as long as he could claim victory over the stubborn handprints.

His arm was starting to ache now from the furious and repeated wiping, so he decided to check on his progress. His lips drew back in a snarl.

The handprints appeared to be mocking him now, seeming even starker against the smooth, almost liquid surface of the polished glass.

Jeffrey hurled the now almost empty bottle of glass cleaner across the dining room, where it bounced off the china cabinet before tumbling to the floor. The notion that he might have cracked the glass on one of the cabinet's doors was the furthest thing from his mind at the moment.

He inched closer to the mirror, his nose mere centimeters away. Each frantic breath fogged the same spot just as it cleared. He had to tilt his head slightly to get the right angle to study the stubborn handprints. And upon closer inspection, he realized they didn't look like normal prints left from the thin coating of oil on a careless person's skin. These looked more like...

No, that was impossible.

Jeffrey retreated back a step as his mind struggled to process what he thought he saw.

The handprints looked like they were on the other side of the glass.

He shook his head in fierce negation, an irrational fear beginning to seep into his gut, despite his attempt to keep it at bay with rational logic.

The only thing on the opposite side of the mirror was the backing of its frame, and then the wall behind it.

But still...

A curious finger rising to his pursed lips, he began to contemplate doing the unthinkable.

In the almost five years that Jeffrey had the mirror in his possession, and the entire span of his life before that—back when it hung in his grandmother's living room, then later his mother's—he never even considered what he was startled to find himself about to do now.

Without the protection of a cotton glove, cloth, or even a budget paper towel, Jeffrey's naked finger crept toward the mirror.

The glass was cool and smooth to the touch. Wincing, he rubbed his finger downwards to see if it would smear one of the handprints.

Curiously, the handprint remained intact, but now there was an additional streak overlapping it; as if his smudged fingerprint was somehow in front of the handprint.

Jeffrey uttered a disbelieving chuckle that startled him. Suddenly the house seemed too still and quiet. He could hear the clock in the sitting room ticking...the birds twittering in the birch tree out front...his neighbor's lawnmower...

Then—before he could talk himself out of it—he thrust his hands toward the mirror, placing them over the handprints to compare sizes.

His hands dwarfed the prints, so they had to be Sarah's—despite her vehement denials. She could be so absent-minded and careless sometimes...

Jeffrey's brow furrowed. Or maybe she did it for spite. She'd never truly appreciated the mirror anyway.

So now that he had proven her guilt, the question became, how was he to deal with her about this?

He continued to stand there, his head now lowered in thought, his hands still pressed against the mirror as if he were being frisked by the police.

The sitting room clock ticked off several seconds, and Jeffrey peered back into the mirror.

A face stared back at him.

Not his face, though; as he would—and should—have expected to see in a mirror.

It was a familiar face, though the resemblance was slight at best.

It was his mother's face, drawn into a pained, almost skeletal leer, her image wispy and insubstantial—as if it were comprised of smoke. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn that he was peering at a ghostly reflection of his late beloved mother.

Frozen to the spot where he stood, all Jeffrey could do was gape at her hollow eyes, eyes that hinted at an abyss of sorrow and suffering.

And resentment.

And right before some neural processor in the rational-thinking portion of Jeffrey's brain shorted out from massive overload, he caught a glimpse of the spectral hands—hands that had once been as familiar to him as his own—reaching out of the mirror as if breaking the surface of a gravity-defying vertical pool of black water, right before they curled around his wrists.

And that was the last lucid thought of Jeffrey Carlson.

The squealing hinges of the front door and her own footfalls seemed deafeningly loud to Sarah as she strode through the foyer and back to the sitting room where she had left her book.

The walk had done her a world of good in calming her temper. And it undoubtedly allowed Jeffrey enough time to restore his beloved mirror to its customary pristine state.

Sarah had just picked up her book and found her place when she had stopped herself.

“Jeffrey?”

No reply.

“Jeffrey?” Louder this time.

Still no answer.

A strange feeling of unease dancing just slightly beyond her perception, she rose from her chair and ventured into the dining room.

The first thing she saw was the now empty bottle of Windex on the floor next to the china hutch, a puddle of the sapphire blue liquid leaking from a jagged split in the plastic bottle had soaked into the beige carpet.

She raised an eyebrow. That wasn't like Jeffrey, to leave even the slightest mess behind.

Then she spotted the bowling ball-sized snarl of paper towels on the floor by the mirror. She scooped it up and used it to blot up some of the spilled Windex. Then she retrieved the broken bottle and headed for the kitchen to dispose of it all, her brow still wrinkled in thought.

Had she looked up at the mirror instead of down at the discarded paper towels, she might have glimpsed a familiar face in the glass—though not her own, as she should have expected.

But her eyes never found those that she had gazed into in both love and anger the past five-plus years; the eyes which now gaped at her in silent horror from behind the antique mirror.

Nor did she notice the newer set of handprints, larger this time, splayed out like desperate pale starfish against the glass—or, more accurately, behind the glass; one of the fingers bearing a familiar band of gold.