

STAINED GLASS, SHATTERED SOULS

By Duane Porter

The stained-glass sign read “Krystal Fantasy,” back-lit by the afternoon sun that illuminated the red, blue, green and gold glass outlined in lead. Beautiful. The artist had worked several pieces of mirrored glass into the design, too. Maybe that was a bit over the top.

I pushed the door open, making the stained-glass chimes tinkle like a swarm of fairies that had been disturbed. The shop overwhelmed me at first, with colors and shapes filling every corner of the cozy display room. I looked past the clutter and spotted the service desk in the back, manned by a twenty-something guy with great blond hair. Maybe this interview would be more interesting than I expected.

“Hi,” I smiled, extending my hand. “I’m Jessica Knowles, from the Northland Gazette. I’m doing a feature on craft shops in the area for next week’s edition, and I’d like to interview the owner.”

“That would be me,” the hunk replied with a crooked grin. “You’re just in time. I was about ready to finish up.”

“Great.” I pulled out my recorder and sat down in the chair he offered. “You don’t mind if I tape this? I find I get distracted if I try to write everything down while I’m asking questions.”

“No, no, that’s fine. I’m Jack, by the way. Jack Hunter.”

“Super. Please call me Jessica. So Jack, how did you come to start your business? Stained-glass isn’t the first thing I would have thought of for a career.”

His blue eyes drifted toward the street window. “Nor for me, Jessica. Nor for me.” He fixed his gaze on me, and I suddenly felt uncomfortable. “Are you *sure* you want to hear this story?”

“Y-yes,” I said. “I’m a reporter. I’m here to listen.”

He sighed and leaned back in his office chair. “Harry Bales was my best friend when we were growing up. We did everything together. Oh, we weren’t juvenile delinquents or anything like that, just the usual kid stuff. The sort of things you do before you know better.”

“Where did you grow up, Jack?”

“A little town in Kansas called Goodfield. About four hundred people or so. As you can imagine, there wasn’t a lot for young guys to do. The year we both turned sixteen, we decided to sneak into the old Simpson place on the south side of town. On Halloween night.”

“Ooh, a real haunted house?” I teased.

Jack grimaced. “That’s what all the kids claimed. We didn’t believe the stories, naturally. Harry and I were just hoping to find some windows still intact that we could bust out. Maybe if we had believed the stories ...”

Jack looked pretty serious. Either he was a great storyteller or he was the biggest con man I’d ever run across. “C’mon, a haunted house?”

“Not like you’d think. We got in easily enough, found a window open in the back. The house was in bad shape, almost ready to fall down. We made it upstairs to a room that had furniture stored in it, all covered over with sheets that had an inch of dust on them.

“One piece of furniture was tall and skinny. We pulled the sheet off and found an antique mirror underneath, oval with a wrought-iron frame. Harry thought it was cool. I couldn’t care less. But Harry wouldn’t let it go. He started spouting off about being sixteen and how he wished he had a car. Then it happened.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“He looked at himself in the mirror and saw a set of keys in his hand. Then he looked down, and by gosh, if he didn’t *really* have keys in his hand!”

“Jack, are you pulling my leg?”

“Honest, Jessica, that’s what happened. Harry said, ‘Do you think this mirror grants wishes?’ I told him I didn’t think so, but he went ahead and wished for a million dollars.”

“And then a genie disguised as a ghost appeared, using the sheet that was covering the big chair in the room. Right?” I almost started to laugh.

The laugh died in my throat as I watched Jack’s face. “No,” he said without a hint of a smile. “A leather briefcase appeared at Harry’s feet. We opened it and found that it was stuffed with hundred-dollar bills. Real money.”

“So, your friend Harry is rich, then.”

“If he had stopped there, maybe. But he had some crazy notion that he needed to make another important wish. I begged him to leave, but he wished for good health and a long life.”

I sighed. “Sounds reasonable for a kid with a million bucks and a car.”

Jack tapped the leg of his desk with his foot. “Turns out he made a mistake. Right after that, Harry said he wanted to leave. Wanted to get out of Goodfield, right then, and never come back. He said this was goodbye, forever.”

“Why would he do that, Jack?”

“He wouldn’t. I could tell when I looked into his eyes. It wasn’t Harry.”

“What do you mean, it wasn’t Harry? I don’t understand.”

Jack rubbed his head absently. “As soon as Harry walked out of the room, I looked into the mirror and said, ‘What happened to Harry?’ And the mirror told me.”

“The mirror *talked* to you? How?”

“In the mirror I saw my own reflection, and behind my reflection in the mirror was Harry. Only he looked scared, and he was screaming for help. I turned around to see, but there was nothing there. Harry was only in the mirror.”

I felt my heart racing. “What did you do next?”

“I figured I needed more information. So I wished to know the truth about the mirror.”

Jack chuckled. “Oh, boy, was *that* enlightening.”

“Well?”

“When I looked in the mirror, I didn’t see myself any more. I saw a demon, all red with boil-looking things all over its skin, and horns on its head, and these wings sprouting out of its shoulder blades. And the eyes were glowing yellow. Then this demon started talking to me.”

I nodded, unable to speak.

“It said that the demons were spirits that lived in an alternate universe, a place of darkness and cold. But there were portals that allowed them to escape into the real world—our world—if the right things happened. The old mirror was one of those portals. When a demon escapes through the portal, it takes over the body of the person here, and that person’s spirit is trapped in the demon world. The last thing a demon wants after escaping is to go back, so they will put as much distance between themselves and the mirror as soon as possible. That’s why

Harry—or the demon that now had Harry’s body—bolted like he did.”

“That’s awful! But Jack, you have to realize that this story is hard to believe!”

Jack smiled, a horrible, sickly smile. “You said you wanted to hear it. Anyway, I wished to know how someone could escape from the mirror. The demon said that once a person makes three wishes, the demon can switch places with them. However, if the mirror was broken, it would shatter into as many pieces as there were spirits who had been taken to the other side. If you cut one of the demons with a sliver from the mirror, the demon’s spirit would escape from the body, and the person’s spirit would be freed from the abyss and could return.”

“What did you do?”

“I picked up the nearest end table and smashed the mirror. I heard the demons screaming as the glass shattered, but I was desperate to save Harry. Then I gathered up the broken pieces—all 274 of them—and took them with me. I vowed that I would not stop until every demon had been returned to the abyss.”

I frowned. “I don’t understand. How could you find the demons? They looked just like anyone else after they took over the wishers’ bodies.”

“Remember, I wished to know the truth about the mirror. When I looked at people, I could see the demons who had inhabited a body. They appeared as demons to me.”

Was this guy for real? If he was, this was a better story than some lame special on craft shops. “So, you became some kind of Jonathan Harker, like in the Dracula story? Only where he hunted vampires, you tracked down demons? That’s an interesting occupation, to say the least. But it doesn’t explain why you started up with stained-glass to pay the bills.”

“Doesn’t it?” he laughed. “Tell me, Jessica, how would you explain to security guards why you were carrying hundreds of broken mirror fragments with you while boarding an airplane? I thought the stained-glass alibi would deflect questions, and it did. Just mix a few pieces of colored glass with the mirror fragments, and I become a respected businessman, not a madman out to destroy wayward demons.”

“Point taken,” I said with growing esteem for him. “You’ve become quite skilled in your hobby—the pieces here are beautiful.”

“With lots of practice, anyone can do it,” he said gruffly. “But it doesn’t matter now, for

my demon-slaying days are about over.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Did you find Harry and free him?”

“Yes. I caught up with ‘Harry’ in Los Angeles two days ago. You can only use a sliver of the mirror one time to release a demon, and then it becomes an ordinary mirror fragment again. That’s handy, because I know how many I have left to go.”

“That must have been wonderful, freeing your friend like that! Jack, how long have you been chasing these demons now?”

He looked to the street again, avoiding my eyes. “Seventy-one years,” he whispered.

Confusion whirled through my brain. “That’s not possible. You can’t be more than twenty-two, twenty-four years old.”

“You’re pretty new at this reporting thing, aren’t you? Didn’t you listen to the story?”

I replayed the tale in my mind, searching for clues. “First Harry got possessed, and then you wished to know what happened to Harry. After that you asked for the truth about the mirror, and then how to get someone back ...” It hit me. I looked at Jack in horror. “You made three wishes, too. You—you went into the mirror.”

“Yes,” he replied softly. “Seven years I was trapped in that mirror, trapped with demons who taunted me, insulted me, and worse.”

“But you’re here now. If you’re not just making this up, how did you escape?”

Jack grinned, showing his teeth. “I discovered another way out. It took me seven years to work up the courage to do it, but I finally did. To escape from the mirror, you must become a demon yourself.”

I stared at him, not comprehending. “You mean you ... you ...”

He grabbed my head and hissed into my face, “Yesss! Yes, I tricked a little boy who found the mirror into asking for three wishes! And then I took his body and left him locked in the demon world!” He sat back, covering his face with his hands, sobs racking his beautiful body. “I had to do it, don’t you see? Or *no* one would have gotten out!”

I cowered against the wall. “So you got out, and that’s when you smashed the mirror? And then you started hunting down the demons?”

He chuckled, weary with effort. “Oh, yes, I hunted them. One by one I slashed their

stolen bodies, and the demons were expelled like a foul vapor as the true owner returned. One by one I put the used mirror fragments into my work, my stained-glass ... Can't you see, it *was* my work! Returning the demons to the outer world that they deserved!"

"But you said seventy-one years ..."

"The demon-spirit keeps the body young. You stop aging after a certain point."

"How—how many have you found, Jack?"

He ignored my question. "Fifty years ago I found a very special demon. Can you guess which one it was?" His eyes glinted with madness. "It was the one who had taken *my* body. I watched him squirm as I cut him, heard him scream in rage as he was pulled out through the ragged cut and back to his prison. And then ..."

I finished his sentence for him. "Then you watched your body die." He didn't look up, he just bit his knuckles in silence. "Your spirit wasn't in the other world to return, was it, Jack? With the demon gone, you watched your body die."

He nodded, thick with grief.

"Jack," I said, wondering how my voice could sound so steady, "How many pieces of the mirror are left?"

Jack pushed his golden hair from his eyes and grabbed a bright sliver of glass from a drawer. "Only one. I've freed them all, Jessica! I've sent them all back! All ... except ... one ..." I caught a glimpse of color reflected in the shard, red skin puffed out like a boil, a yellow eye burning ...

He drew the point across his forearm smoothly, and the skin parted.

Is this what a tornado sounds like? I wondered. A torrent like a fire-hose exploded from his arm, crimson waves of energy buffeted my ears. The stained-glass masterpieces shuddered and shook in their frames.

Then all was quiet. I heard only the mixed sobs and giggles of the man before me. "Jack?" I said.

He uncovered his head. His hair had turned gray, his face now impossibly wrinkled. His body, shrunken with age, fit loose in his clothes. His wild eyes darted around the unfamiliar surroundings.

“I’m not Jack,” he whispered. “I’m Bobby Williams.” He looked at me in fear. “Is this a trick, demon?” he shouted. “I’m still there, aren’t I? Will you never stop tormenting me?”

I dialed 911. After the paramedics took Bobby away, I went home to my apartment. I cooked myself some dinner, but didn’t eat any of it. Then I went to bed.

Jack was finally free of his guilt. But now he was haunted by his demons for eternity. And I fear they will visit me in my dreams for quite some time.