

Miracle Polish (Steven Millhauser)

I should have said no to the stranger at the door, with his skinny throat and his black sample case that pulled him a little to the side, so that one of his jacket cuffs was higher than the other, a polite no would have done the trick, no thanks, I'm afraid not, not today, then the closing of the door and the heavy click of the latch, but I'd seen the lines of dirt in the black shoe creases, the worn-down heels, the shine on the jacket sleeves, the glint of desperation in his eyes. All the more reason, I said to myself, to send him on his way, as I stepped aside and watched him move into my living room. He looked quickly around before setting his case down on the small table next to the couch. I'd made up my mind to buy something from him, anything, a hairbrush, the Brooklyn Bridge, buy it and get him out of there, I had better things to do with my time, but there was no hurrying him as he slowly undid each clasp with his bony fingers and explained in a mournful voice that this was my lucky day. In the suddenly opened case I saw six rows of identical dark-brown glass bottles, each a bit smaller than a bottle of cough medicine. Two things struck me: the case must have been very heavy, and he must not have sold anything in a long time. The product was called Miracle Polish. It cleaned mirrors with one easy flick of the wrist. He seemed surprised, even suspicious, when I said I'd take one, as if he had wandered the earth for years with the same case filled to bursting with unsold bottles. I tried not to imagine what would drive a man to go from house to house in a neighborhood like this one, with porches and old maples and kids playing basketball in driveways, a neighborhood where Girl Scouts sold you cookies and the woman across the street asked you to contribute to the leukemia drive, but no strangers with broken-down shoes and desperate eyes came tramping from door to door lugging heavy cases full of brown bottles called Miracle Polish. The name exasperated me, a child could have done better than that, though there was something to be said for the way it sat there flaunting its fraudulence. "Don't trust me!" it shouted for all to hear. "Don't be a fool!"

When he tried to sell me a second bottle, he understood from my look that it was time to go. "You've made a wise choice," he said solemnly, glancing at me and looking abruptly away. Then he clicked his case shut and hurried out the door, as if afraid I'd change my mind. Lifting a slat of the half-closed blinds, I watched him make his way along the front walk with the sample case pulling him to one side. At the sidewalk he stopped, put down his case next to the sugar maple, wiped his jacket sleeve across his forehead, and gazed up the block as if he were the new boy in school, getting ready to cross the school yard, where faces were already turning to stare at him. For a moment he looked back at my house. When he saw me watching him, he grinned suddenly, then frowned and jerked his head away. With a sharp snap I let the blind-slat drop.

I had no interest in mirror polish. I placed the bottle in a drawer of the hutch, where I kept extra flashlight batteries, packages of light bulbs, and an unused photograph album, and gave no more thought to it.

Early one morning, a week or so later, I stepped over to the oval mirror in the upstairs hall, as I did every morning before leaving for work. As I tugged down the sides of my suit jacket and smoothed my tie, I noticed a small smudge on the glass, near my left shoulder. It had probably been there for years, ever since I'd brought the mirror down from my parents' attic, along with a faded armchair and my grandmother's couch with the threadbare arms. I tried to recall whether I

had ever cleaned the oval mirror before, whether I had ever bothered to dust the old mahogany frame carved with leaves and flowers. I understood that I was having these thoughts only because of the stranger with the bony fingers and the worn-down heels, and as I went down to the hutch I felt a burst of irritation as I heard him say, "This is your lucky day."

Upstairs I pulled a tissue from the box in the bathroom and unscrewed the top of the brown bottle. On the dark glass, in white capital letters, stood the words "miracle polish." The liquid was thick, slow, and greenish white. I applied a bit to the tissue and wiped the smudge. When I lifted my hand I was almost disappointed to see that the spot was gone. I was aware of another thing: the rest of the mirror looked dull or tarnished. Had I really never noticed it before? With another dab of polish I set to work wiping the entire surface, right up to the curves of the frame. It was done quickly; I stepped back for a look. In the light from the overhead bulb with its old glass shade, mixed with sunlight from the window on the nearby landing, I saw myself reflected clearly. But it was more than that. There was a freshness to my image, a kind of mild glow that I had never seen before. I looked at myself with interest. This in itself was striking, for I wasn't the kind of man who looked at himself in mirrors. I was the kind of man who spent as little time as possible in front of mirrors, the kind of man who had a brisk and practical relation to his reflection, with its tired eyes, its disappointed shoulders, its look of defeat. Now I was standing before a man who resembled my old reflection almost exactly but who had been changed in some manner, the way a lawn under a cloudy sky changes when the sun comes out. What I saw was a man who had something to look forward to, a man who expected things of life.

That afternoon when I returned from work, I went up to the oval mirror. In the polished glass I was struck again by a sense of freshness. Had the mirror really been so deeply in need of cleaning? There were three other mirrors in the house: the mirror over the sink in the upstairs bathroom, the mirror over the sink in the downstairs half bath, and the small circular mirror with a wooden handle that hung on a hook beside the upstairs-bathroom window. None of them had seemed to need cleaning before, but when I was through with them I saw my new reflection glowing back at me from all three. I looked at the brown bottle of Miracle Polish in my hand. It seemed an ordinary bottle, a bottle like any other. If the polish had made me look younger, if it had made me handsome, if it had smoothed my skin and fixed my teeth and changed the shape of my nose, I'd have known it was some horrible mechanical trick, and I'd have smashed those mirrors with my fists rather than allow myself to be taken in like a fool. But the image in the mirror was unmistakably me—not young, not good-looking, not anything in particular, a little slumped, heavy at the waist, pouchy under the eyes, not the sort of man that anyone would ever choose to be. And yet he looked back at me in a way I hadn't seen for a long time, a way that made the other things all right. He looked back at me—the thought sprang to mind—like a man who believed in things.

The next morning I woke before my alarm and hurried over to the oval mirror in the hall. My image glowed back at me; even my rumpled pajamas had a certain jaunty look. In the polished glass the dull walls seemed brighter, the bedroom door a richer brown. In the bathroom mirror I shone forth; the whiteness of the sink burned in the glass; the towels looked fuller. Downstairs, the reflected window in the half bath showed part of a brilliant curtain, beyond which lay the green grass of childhood summers. All day at work I thought of nothing but those shining

surfaces, like coins catching the sun, and when I came home I went from mirror to mirror, striking poses, turning my head from side to side.

Because I prided myself on never having false hopes, on never permitting myself to imagine that things were better than they were, I asked myself whether I might be allowing the mirrors to deceive me. Maybe the greenish-white polish contained a chemical that, upon contact with glass, produced an optical distortion. Maybe the words “Miracle Polish” had caused cells in my brain to fire in a series of associations that affected the way I saw the reflected world. Whatever was happening, I knew that I needed another opinion, from someone I could trust. It was Monica who would set me straight, Monica who would know—Monica, who looked at the world through large, kind, skeptical eyes, darkened by many disappointments.

Monica arrived, as she did twice a week after work, once on Tuesdays and once, with her overnight bag, on Fridays, and as always when I greeted her I was careful not to look too closely at her, for Monica was likely to draw back and say “Is something wrong?” while raising her hand anxiously to her hair. She had a habit of assessing her looks mercilessly: she approved of her eyes, liked the shape of her wrists and the length of her fingers, put up with her calves, but was unforgiving about her thighs, her chin, her biggish knees, her hips, her upper arms. She fretted over any imperfection in her skin, like a mosquito bite or a heat rash or a tiny pimple, and often wore a hidden Band-Aid on a shoulder or calf, holding some ointment in place. She wore long skirts that came down to her ankles, with plain blouses over plain white bras; she liked to mix dark greens, dark browns, and dark grays. Her shoulder-length brown hair was usually straight and parted in the middle, though sometimes she pulled it back and gathered it in a big dark clip that looked like an enormous insect. She inspected herself in front of any mirror, searching for flaws like a teen-age girl before a big party. In fact she was forty and worked as an administrative assistant at the local high school. For years we had edged toward each other without moving all the way. I liked how she hesitated a little before easing into a smile; liked the slight heaviness of her body, its faint awkwardness, its air of mild tiredness; liked how, when she took off her shoes and placed her feet on the hassock, she would wiggle her toes slowly and say, crinkling her eyes, “That feels really, really good.” Sometimes, in a certain light, when she held her body a certain way, I would see her as a woman for whom things had not worked out as she had hoped, a woman sinking slowly into defeat. Then a burst of fellow feeling would come over me, for I knew how difficult it was, waiting for something better, waiting for something that was never going to happen.

I took her upstairs to the oval mirror and switched on the light. “Look at that!” I said, and swept out my arm in a stagy way. It was a gesture meant to imply that what I had to show her was nothing much, really, nothing to be taken seriously. I had hoped the reflection in the polished mirror would please her in some way, but I hadn’t expected what I saw—for there she was, without a touch of weariness, a fresh Monica, a vibrant Monica, a Monica with a glow of pleasure in her face. She was dressed in clothes that no longer seemed a little drab, a little elderly, but were handsomely understated, seductively restrained. Not for a moment did the mirror make her look young, or beautiful, for she was not young and she was not beautiful. But it was as if some inner constriction had dissolved, some sense of her drifting gradually into unhappiness. In the mirror she gave forth a fine resilience. Monica saw it; I saw her see it; and

she began turning her body from side to side, smoothing down her long skirt over her hips, pulling her shoulders back, arranging her hair.

Now in the mornings I rose with a kind of zest and went directly to the hall mirror, where even my tumbled hair gave me a look of casual confidence, and the shadowy folds under my eyes spoke of someone in the habit of facing and overcoming obstacles. In my cubicle I worked with concentration and with an odd lightness of heart, and when I returned home in the late afternoon I looked at myself in all four mirrors. It struck me that before I could reach the oval mirror in the upstairs hall, I had to pass through the front hall, cross the dusky living room with its sagging couch, walk the length of the kitchen, and climb two sets of creaking stairs, the long one up to the landing and the short one up to the hall. One night after dinner I drove to the outskirts of town, where the old shopping center faced off against the new mall in a battle of slashed prices. In the aisle after blenders and juicers I came to them. I saw tall narrow mirrors, square mirrors framed in oak and dark walnut, round mirrors like gigantic eyeglass lenses, cheval mirrors, mirrors framed in coppered bronze, mirrors with rows of hooks along the bottom. Avoiding my reflections as well as I could, for these mirrors showed only a tired man with a look of sorrow in his eyes, I chose a rectangular mirror with a cherrywood frame. At home I opened a drawer of the hutch and took out the brown bottle. With a few careful swipes of a cloth I polished the mirror. I hung it in the front hall, across from the closet and next to the boot tray with its old slippers and gardening shoes, and stepped back. In the light of the ceiling bulb I saw my reflection, standing with a cloth over his shoulder and looking out at me as if ready to hurl himself into whatever the day might bring. The sight of him standing there with his sleeves pushed up and his cloth over his shoulder and his look of readiness—all this made me smile, and the smile that came back to me seemed to stream out of the glass and into my arms, my chest, my face, my blood.

The next day after work I stopped at a furniture store and bought another mirror. At home I polished it and hung it in the kitchen, facing the table. As I ate my dinner I was able to look up whenever I liked and see the oak table, the gleaming plate with its chicken leg and baked potato, the glowing silverware, and my reflection looking up alertly, like someone whose attention has been called to an important matter.

On Friday, Monica entered the front hall and stopped sharply when she saw the mirror. She glanced at me and seemed about to say something, then turned her face away. In front of the mirror she stared at herself thoughtfully for a long while. Without turning back to me, she said she supposed it wouldn't be such a bad idea to be able to check her hair and blouse before entering the living room, especially when it was pouring down rain, or when the wind was blowing. I said nothing as I watched her reflection push her hair boldly from her cheek. Together she and Monica moved toward the edge of the mirror and disappeared into the living room.

In the kitchen I saw Monica's lips pull into a little tight circle. It was an expression I'd never cared for, with its combination of petulance and stubborn severity, but in the new mirror I saw only a flirtatious pout. "It's just an experiment," I said. "If you really don't like it—" "But it's your house," she said. "But that isn't the point," I said. She threw me a look and lowered her eyes; it was a way she had of protesting silently. She sat with her back to the mirror as I brewed her a pot of

herb tea. Seated across from her, I was able to look beyond her strained face to the back of her head, the back of her blouse collar showing through her hair, the top of her shoulder blades. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves as she talked to me about her troubles with the lawn man. Once, when she turned to look out the window, I saw in the mirror the curved line of her forehead, the upward slant of the bottom of her nose, the little slope between her nostrils and her upper lip, and I was struck by the fine liveliness of her profile.

I let a day pass, but the next day I bought a large dark-framed mirror for the living room and hung it across from the couch. I took out my brown bottle and polished the mirror well, and when I stepped back I admired the new room that sprang into view in the polished depths. Monica would, of course, push her lips together, but she would come to see it was all for the best. The mirrors of my house filled me with such a sense of gladness that a room without one struck me as a dark cell. I brought home a full-length mirror for the TV room, a rectangular mirror with a simple frame for the upstairs bedroom, an identical one for the guest room down the hall. At a yard sale I bought an old shield-shaped mirror that I hung in the cellar, behind the washer and dryer. One evening when I entered the kitchen a restlessness seized me, and when I returned from the mall I hung a second mirror in the kitchen, between the two windows.

Monica said nothing; I could feel her opposition hardening in her like a muscle. I wasn't unaware that I was behaving oddly, like a man in the grip of an obsession. At the same time, what I was doing felt entirely natural and necessary. Some people added windows to brighten their homes—I bought mirrors. Was it such a bad thing? I kept seeing them at yard sales, leaning against rickety tables piled with pink dishes, or hanging in hallways and bedrooms at estate sales at the fancy end of town. I added a second one to the living room, a third to the upstairs bath. In the front hall, on the back of the front door, I hung a mirror framed in a dark wood that matched the color of the umbrella stand. When I passed by my mirrors, when I caught even a glimpse of myself as I walked into a room, I felt a surge of well-being. What was the harm? Now and then Monica tried to be playful about it all. "What?" she would say. "Only one mirror on the landing?" Then her expression would change as she saw me sinking into thought. Once, she said, "You know, sometimes I think you like me better there"—she pointed to a mirror—"than here"—she pointed to herself. She said it teasingly, with a little laugh, but in her look was an anxious question. As if to prove her wrong, I turned my full attention to her. Before me I saw a woman with a worried forehead and unhappy eyes. I imagined her gazing out at me from all the mirrors of my house, with eyes serene and full of hope, and an impatience came over me as I looked at her dark-brown sweater, at the hand nervously smoothing her dark-green skirt, at the lines of tension in her mouth.

In order to demonstrate to Monica that all was well between us, that nothing had changed, that I was no slave to mirrors, I proposed a Saturday picnic. We packed a lunch in a basket and took a long drive out to the lake. Monica had put on a big-brimmed straw hat I had never seen before, and a new light-green blouse with a little shimmer in it; in the car she took off her hat and placed it on her lap as she sat back with half-closed eyes and let the sunlight ripple over her face. A tiny green jewel sparkled on her earlobe. At the picnic grounds we sat at one of the sunny-and-shady tables scattered under the high pines that grew at the edge of a small beach. It was a hot, drowsy day; the smoke of grills rose into the branches; a man stood with one foot

on his picnic-table bench, an arm resting on his thigh as he held a can of beer and stared out at the beach and the water; kids ran among the tables; on the beach, three boys in knee-length bathing trunks were playing catch with enormous baseball gloves and a lime-green tennis ball; a plump mother and her gaunt teen-age son were hitting a volleyball back and forth; young women in bikinis and men with white hair on their chests strolled on the sand; in the water, a few people were splashing and laughing; a black dog with tall ears was swimming toward shore with a wet stick in its mouth; farther out, you could see canoes moving and oars lifting with sun flashes of spray; and when I turned to Monica I saw the whole afternoon flowing into her face and eyes. After the picnic, we walked along a trail that led partway around the lake. Here and there, on narrow strips of sand at the lake edge, people lay on their backs on towels in the sun. We made our way down to the shore, through prickly bushes; on the sand Monica pulled off her sandals, and lifting up her long skirt she stepped into the water and threw back her head to take in the sun with closed eyes. At that moment it seemed to me that everything was possible for Monica and me; and going up to her I said, "I've never seen you like this!" With her eyes still closed she said, "I'm not myself today!" She began to laugh. Then I began to laugh, because of what we had both said, and because of her laughter and the sun and the sky and the lake.

On the ride home she fell asleep with her head against my shoulder. The long outing had tired me, too, though not in the same way. In the course of the afternoon an uneasiness had begun to creep into me. The glare of the sun on the water hurt my eyes; the heat pressed down on me; there was a slowness in things, a sluggishness; Monica seemed to walk with more effort, as if the air were a hot heaviness she was pushing her way through. The two of us, she in her straw hat and I in my cargo shorts, seemed to me actors playing the part of ordinary people, enjoying a day at the lake. In fact I was a man weighed down with disappointment, a man for whom things had not worked out the way he had once imagined, a quiet man, cautious in his life, timid when you came right down to it, though content enough to drift along through the little rituals of his day. And Monica? I glanced over at her. The back of her hand lay on her leg. The four fingers were leaning to one side, the thumb hung in front of them—and something about those fingers and that thumb seemed to me the shape of despair.

But when I opened my front door and stepped into the hall behind Monica, then the good feeling returned. In the mirror we stood there, she in her shimmering green blouse and I with a glow of sunburn on my face. Deep in the shine of the polished glass, her hand rose in a graceful arc to remove her straw hat.

In the living room I snatched glimpses of her in both mirrors as she walked buoyantly toward the kitchen. In the sunny kitchen her cheerful reflection picked up a pitcher of water that caught the light. I looked at the second mirror, where she began to raise a glass of shining water, paused suddenly, and opened her mouth in a lusty yawn. "I'd like to lie down," Monica said. I turned my head and saw her tight lips and tired eyelids. I followed her as she made her way slowly up the stairs and past the new mirror on the landing. For a moment her hair glowed at me from the glass. At the top of the stairs she walked sternly and without a glance past the oval mirror and into the bedroom, where I watched her bright reflection lie down on the bed and close her eyes. I, too, was tired, I was more than tired, but the sheer pleasure of being home filled me with a restless energy that drove me to stride through all the rooms of the house. From time to time I

stopped before a polished mirror to turn my head this way and that. It was as if my house, with its many mirrors, drew all the old heaviness and weariness from my body; and in a sudden burst of inspiration I took out the bottle of Miracle Polish, which was still two-thirds full, and went down to the cellar, where I applied it to a new mirror that had been leaning against the side of the washing machine, waiting for me to decide where to hang it.

Later that evening, as we sat in the living room, Monica still seemed tired, and a little moody. I had led her to the couch and tried to position her so that she could see her good-humored reflection, but she refused to look at herself. I could feel resistance coming out of her like the push of a hand. In the mirror I admired a shoulder of her blouse. Then I glanced over at the other Monica, the one sitting stiffly and very quietly on the couch. I had the sense of a sky darkening before a storm. "Can't," I thought I heard her say, so softly that I wondered if she had spoken at all; or perhaps she had said "Can."

"What did you—" I breathed out, barely able to hear my own words.

"I can't," she said, and now there was no mistaking it. "Such a perfect day. And now—this." She raised her arm in a weary sweeping motion that seemed to include the entire room, the entire universe. In the mirror her reflection playfully swept out her arm. "I can't. I tried, but I can't. I can't. You'll have to—you'll have to choose."

"Choose?"

Her answer was so hushed that it seemed barely more than an exhalation of air. "Between me and—her."

"You mean . . . her?"

"I hate her," she whispered, and burst into tears. She immediately stopped, took a deep breath, and burst into tears again. "You don't look at me," she said. "But that's not—" I said. "I have to go," she said, and stood up. She was no longer crying. She took another deep breath and rubbed her nostrils with the back of a bent finger. She reached into a pocket of her skirt and pulled out a tissue that crumbled into fuzz. "Here," I said, holding out my handkerchief. She hesitated, took it from me, and dabbed at her nostrils. She handed back the handkerchief. She looked at me and turned to leave. "Don't," I said. "Me or her," she whispered, and was out the door.

During the next week I flung myself into my work, which was just complicated enough to require my full attention, without interesting me in the least. At five o'clock I came directly home, where I felt soothed in every room. But I was no child, no naïve self-deceiver intent on evading a predicament. I wanted to understand things; I wanted to make up my mind. From the beginning there had been a deep kinship between Monica and me. She was wary, trained to expect little of life, grateful for small pleasures, on her guard against promises, accustomed to making the best of things, in the habit of both wanting and not daring to want something more. Now Miracle Polish had come along, with its air of swagger and its taunting little whisper. Why not? it seemed to say. Why on earth not? But the mirrors that strengthened me, that filled me with new life, made Monica bristle. Did she feel that I preferred a false version of her, a glittering version, to the flesh-and-blood Monica with her Band-Aids and big knees and her burden of sorrows? What

drew me was exactly the opposite. In the shining mirrors I saw the true Monica, the hidden Monica, the Monica buried beneath years of discouragement. Far from escaping into a world of polished illusions, I was able to see, in the depths of those mirrors, the world no longer darkened by diminishing hopes and fading dreams. There, all was clear, all was possible. Monica, I understood perfectly, would never see things as I did. When she looked in the mirrors, she saw only a place that kept pulling me away from her and, in that place, a rival of whom she was desperately jealous.

I felt myself moving slowly in the direction of a dangerous decision I did not wish to make, like someone swerving on an icy road toward an embankment.

It wasn't until another week had passed that I knew what I was going to do. Summer was in its fullness; on front porches, neighbors fanned themselves with folded newspapers; sprinklers sent arcs of spray onto patches of lawn and strips of driveway, which shone in the sun like black licorice; at the top of a ladder, a man in a baseball cap moved a paintbrush lazily back and forth. It was Saturday afternoon. I had called Monica that morning and told her I had something important to show her. She was to meet me on the front porch. We sat there drinking lemonade, like an old married couple, watching the kids passing on bicycles, a squirrel scampering along a telephone wire. A robin was pecking furiously at the roadside grass. After a while I said, "Let's go inside." She turned to me then, as if she were about to ask a question. "If that's what you want," she finally said, and turned both hands palm up.

When we stepped into the front hall, Monica stopped. She stopped so abruptly that it was as if someone had put a heavy hand on her shoulder. I watched her stare at the place where the mirror had hung. She looked at me, and looked again at the wall. Then she turned and looked at the back of the front door. Its dark panels shone dully under the hall light. Monica reached out and touched her fingers to my arm.

I took her through every room of the house, stopping before familiar walls. In the living room a photograph of my parents looked out at us from the wall where one mirror had hung. The other place was bare except for two small holes in the faded wallpaper, with its pattern of tall vases filled with pale flowers. In the kitchen a new poster showed many kinds of tea. In place of the oval mirror in the upstairs hall, there was a framed painting of an old mill beside a brown pond with two ducks. New bathroom cabinets with bevelled-edge mirrors hung over the upstairs and downstairs sinks. I could see the gratitude rushing into Monica's cheeks. When the tour was over, I led her to the drawer in the hutch and removed the brown bottle. In the kitchen she watched me pour the thick greenish-white liquid into the sink. I washed out the empty bottle and dropped it into the garbage pail next to the stove. She turned to me and said, "This is the most wonderful gift that you—"

"We're not done yet," I said, with a touch of excitement in my voice, and led her through the kitchen door and down the four wooden steps into the back yard.

Against the back of the house all the mirrors stood lined up, slanted at different angles. There it was, the oval mirror from the upstairs hall, leaning over a cellar window. There they were, the two front-hall mirrors, the kitchen mirrors in their wooden frames, the shield-shaped mirror from

the cellar, the living-room mirrors, the bedroom mirrors, the full-length mirror from the TV room, a pair of guest-room mirrors, the upstairs-bathroom mirror removed from its cabinet, the mirror from the landing, the downstairs-bathroom mirror, and other mirrors that I had bought and polished and stored in closets, ready to be hung: square mirrors and round mirrors, swivel mirrors on wooden stands, a mirror shaped like a four-leaf clover. In the bright sun, the polished mirrors gleamed like jewels.

"Here they are!" I said, throwing out my hand. I began walking along in front of them, from one end to the other. As I passed from mirror to mirror slanted against the house, I could see different parts of me: my shoes and pant cuffs, my belt and the bottom of my shirt, my sudden whole shape in the tall mirror, my swinging hand. Now and then I caught pieces of Monica's rival, standing back on the green, green grass. "And now," I said, as if I were addressing a crowd—and I paused for dramatic effect. I glanced at Monica, who stood there with a look that was difficult to fathom, a worried look, it seemed to me, and I wanted to assure her that there was nothing to worry about, I was doing it all for her, everything would soon be fine. I bent over behind a broad mirror at the end of the row and withdrew a hammer. And, raising the hammer high, I swung it against the glass. Then I walked back along that row of mirrors, swinging the hammer and sending bright spikes of glass into the summer air. "There!" I cried, and smashed another. "See!" I shouted. I swung, I smashed. Lines of wetness ran along my face. Bits of mirror clung to my shirt.

It was over faster than I'd thought possible. All along the back of the house, broken mirror-glass lay glittering on the grass. Here and there, an empty frame showed triangles of glass still clinging to the wood. I looked at the hammer in my hand. Suddenly I threw it across the yard, hurled it high into the row of spruces at the back. I could hear the hammer falling slowly through the needly branches.

"There!" I said to Monica. I made a wiping gesture with both hands, the way you do when you're done with something. Then I began walking up and down in front of her. A terrible excitement burned in me. I could feel my blood beating in my neck. I imagined it bursting through the skin in brilliant gushes of red. "She's gone! That's what you wanted! Isn't it? Isn't it? All gone! Bye-bye! Are you happy now? Are you?" I stopped in front of her. "Are you? Are you?" I bent close. "Are you? Are you? Are you?" I bent closer still. I bent so close that I couldn't see her anymore. "Are you? Are you? Are you? Are you? Are you?"

Monica did the only thing she could do: she fled. But first she stood there as if she were about to speak. She stared at me with the look of a woman who has been struck repeatedly across the face. There was hurt in that look, and tiredness, and a sort of pained tenderness. And along with it all came a quiet sureness, as of someone who has made up her mind. Then she turned and walked away.

There is a restlessness so terrible that you can no longer bear to sit still in your house. You walk from room to room like someone visiting a deserted town. Every day I mourned for my mirrors with their gleam of Miracle Polish. Where they'd once hung I saw only patterns in wallpaper, framed paintings, door panels, lines of dust. One day I drove out to the mall and came home with an oval mirror in a plain dark frame, which I hung in the upstairs hall; I used it strictly for

checking my suit jacket. Once, when the doorbell rang, I rushed downstairs to the front door, but it was only a boy with a jar collecting money for a new Scout troop. I could feel grayness sifting down on me like dust. A bottle of Miracle Polish—was it so much to ask? One of these days the stranger is bound to come again. He'll walk toward my house with his heavy case tugging him to one side. In my living room he'll snap open the clasps and show me the brown bottles, row on row. Mournfully he'll tell me that it's my lucky day. In a voice that is calm, but decisive and self-assured, I'll tell him that I want every bottle, every last one. When I close my eyes, I can see the look of suspicion on his face, along with a touch of slyness, a shadow of contempt, and the beginnings of unbearable hope.