

# MIRROR IMAGE

By Chuck Hustmyre

Sometimes when you look in the mirror,  
the mirror looks back.

William Bailey's forehead shattered the mirror like a sledgehammer. The last thing he remembered before he blacked out was the feeling that he was falling through the mirror. Sub-cranial hematoma, a concussion, maybe even a cracked skull-- that had to be the reason for the strange feeling. The mirror was mounted on the wall just to the right of the bar, four feet tall by about three feet wide. As consciousness slipped away, common sense and his strong belief in the rational world told him that he couldn't fall through the mirror. He must have bounced his head off the wall and be falling toward the floor.

It seemed like just a second or two before William's eyes popped open. He lay on his back, on the hard wood floor of Fausto's, with Johnny Davis towering over him. Big Johnny probably wanted to finish him off, maybe kill him, and finally end their twenty-year-old feud. Either Big Johnny Davis and the ceiling lights above him were spinning, or William's head was

spinning, but either way something wasn't right.

He raised his head and looked to his left, toward the bar. Except the bar wasn't there. Instead, he was staring at the bathrooms. That didn't make sense. It must be his brain that had gotten spun around. William turned his head and peered over his size-ten wingtips at the busted mirror. The wooden frame and most of the glass still clung to the wall, the rest sat broken on the ground. The bar had to be on his left. He looked again, and still saw the bathrooms. A brain bruise, maybe some fluid pressure building up might be the cause of it.

"Get up!" Big Johnny Davis said.

William looked up at him. Johnny stood behind him, just beyond his shoulders. Perfect place for him to stomp my head into the plank floor. Except Johnny Davis was holding out his hand.

"Come on, we've got to get out of here."

Davis looked scared. It was the first time William Bailey could ever remember Johnny Davis looking scared. William had always been scared of Big Johnny, but Big Johnny wasn't scared of anything or anyone.

Police sirens wailed in the distance.

Johnny glanced over his shoulder. William craned his neck to look where Johnny was looking, saw he was staring at the front door like a man terrified something bad was going to come

through it. Big Johnny looked down at him again and pumped his hand. "Come on, get up. They'll be here any second."

"Who?" William asked. "Who'll be--" But before he finished, Big Johnny Davis reached down, grabbed him by both arms, and jerked him to his feet.

As he was dragged toward the door by the only man in town who truly hated him, William glanced up and saw the rusted metal sign nailed above the door. He had to have a concussion, probably severe; that had to be it, because the letters on the sign were backward. It said TUO.

As Johnny Davis pulled him out the door, William heard tires skid on the pavement.

"Where's your car?" Johnny asked.

William twisted away from the big man's grip, then turned to his left. "In the alley." He started to run, still not sure exactly what he was running from.

Behind him, Big John shouted, "The alley's over here."

William kept running but turned his head back toward Johnny. "I know where the alley--"

Something hit him across the midsection and toppled him to the ground. He got his hands up just in time to break his fall and managed to keep his head from slamming into the sidewalk. When he looked up he saw a shopping cart tumbled onto its side.

Once again, William found himself lying flat on his back,

this time amid the spilled contents of the cart. It had been filled with junk: paper bags full of dirty clothes, canned food, bags of potato chips, a diamond shaped, orange road sign, and other trash that looked like it had been collected from back alley garbage bins.

The homeless man who'd been pushing the cart was scrawny, and wafer thin. His skin was the color of old shoe leather, and he wore a long gray beard, tangled and matted with food and bits of filth. He was sprawled on the ground next to his cart, half sitting up, staring at William with his bright blue eyes.

Car doors slammed, men shouted.

"You better get going," the homeless man said, as he cocked his head. "The police after you?"

Police!

Before William could assure the old man that the police weren't after him--he was a respected businessman and family man--someone behind him grabbed him under both arms and pulled him to his feet. William turned and found himself staring into the face of Johnny Davis. "The alley's that way," Johnny said, pointing to the other side of Fausto's. With one hand gripping William's jacket, Johnny dashed across the front of the bar toward the alley. The alley--right there, plain as day--on the other side of Fausto's, right where it shouldn't be, where it couldn't be. William had been here a thousand times. As you

stepped out of the bar, the alley was on the left, Brockton's Ace Hardware on the right. Now everything was mixed up and in the wrong place.

Johnny Davis turned down the alley, dragging William behind him. After just a few steps, a spotlight flashed in front of them.

"Stop!" a voice commanded. "Get on the ground."

William couldn't see because Johnny was in his way. "Who's that yelling?" he asked.

Big Johnny stopped and William plowed into his back.

"Get on the ground," the voice boomed again.

William poked his head out from behind Johnny Davis's back. The blinding white light was in his face. He couldn't see a thing.

POP! POP! POP!

Gunshots.

Big Johnny sagged, then crashed to his knees. Instinctively, William bent forward and grabbed hold of Johnny. "What's the matter?"

More pops.

Johnny's big hand reached out and shoved William back toward the street. "Back door," he wheezed, then plunged forward onto his face.

William stood alone. Behind the white spotlight he saw

blue police lights flashing. He was totally exposed.

POP! POP!

He saw flashes--little yellow spurts of flame--as something tugged at his jacket.

William had said "back door." What back door? Fausto's had a back door, but it didn't lead anywhere except to the open space behind the building used for trash and deliveries. Twenty feet of asphalt between the bar and the back of the building on the next block. William had parked his car at the end of the alley, but the police cars--or whatever they were--had the alley blocked off. The building behind Fausto's also had an alley that ran alongside it, but the owner had closed it off to keep the bums out. He'd put up a gate, padlocked it, and topped it with razor wire. It was a dead end.

Two more pops. Dead end or not it was better than standing here and getting shot. William turned and ran. He burst through the front door of Fausto's, dashed through the bar, past the shattered mirror, hit the back door at a dead run, and was outside behind the bar within seconds.

He could see the tail end of his car sticking out from the corner of the building, but with the cops blocking the alley, his car was useless to him. William glanced across the open space to the alley that ran next to the other building. The gate, the padlock, the razor wire--all still in place. To his

right an overflowing garbage dumpster sat beside the back of Fausto's, jammed against the fire ladder.

The fire ladder.

An iron ladder bolted to the cinderblock wall.

William looked up. The top of the ladder was lost in shadow, but he knew it went up two stories to the roof. Last summer, when the toilet had stopped up, he'd come out back to take a leak and had stood behind the dumpster, peeing against the wall like a kid, one hand draped over the bottom rung of the ladder.

He slipped behind the dumpster. The smell made him gag. The bottom of the ladder was four feet from the ground. William reached up as high as he could, grabbed hold of the third rung, then hauled himself up.

Through the partially open back door came the sounds of heavy feet pounding on the hard wood floor of the bar.

Halfway up the ladder, he was exhausted--and scared. Shaking, he white-knuckled the ladder. Being more than ten feet off the ground terrified him. He needed a break, just a second or two to catch his breath. There was enough moonlight so he could see into one of the second story windows. Inside, junk was piled everywhere. Old barstools, a busted jukebox, furniture stacked almost to the ceiling. Years ago, old man Fausto lived on the second floor, but Jake, who'd bought the

place from the old man and had decided to keep the name, used it for storage.

Below him, William heard the back door thrown open so hard it banged against the wall. He scrambled up until he reached the top of the ladder, then hoisted himself over the edge of the roof. Down on the ground a voice shouted, "There he is, up there."

Another gunshot. What the hell was going on?

The unmistakable sound of feet--fast feet, in shape feet, boot shod feet--scurrying up the ladder. Standing on the tar and pebble roof, William glanced around for something he could use as a weapon, shocked he was even thinking of such a thing. A five gallon plastic bucket was all there was. It stood upright, filled with rainwater. He picked it up and peered over the edge. A uniformed policeman was three quarters of the way up the ladder. Two more cops were right behind him.

William looked at the heavy bucket in his hands, thought about just dumping the water onto them but knew it wouldn't stop them. There was only one way to stop them, and that was to knock them off the ladder. He thought about warning them, maybe trying to scare them away. But they were cops. You couldn't scare them away.

So why had they shot Johnny Davis, and why were they shooting at him?

The first officer looked up and saw William staring down at him with the bucket in his hands. Their eyes locked for just a second and the cop stopped. In those eyes that stared back at him, William saw an almost maniacal determination that sent a shiver down his spine. The officer held his grip on the ladder with his right hand while his left dropped to the pistol resting in his gleaming leather holster. In one smooth motion he drew his gun and raised it toward William.

William Bailey tossed the bucket down the ladder. A shot rang out an instant before the heavy bucket thudded into the cop's head. Like a gruesome traffic accident happening before his eyes, William couldn't help but watch as the policeman fell, taking his two partners down with him. The last thing William saw before he turned away was a jumbled heap of black uniforms resting on the concrete below the ladder.

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Hiding in the shadow of a telephone booth, thinking. Home. He had to get home. Had to get back to Marge and the kids. Maybe somehow he could explain what had happened. Vincent, his attorney, he would know what to do--maybe--but he was a civil lawyer not a criminal attorney. He wrote contracts and did personal injury on the side; he didn't get people out of jail who'd killed a cop by dropping a bucket of water on his head and knocking him and his buddies off the side of a building.

As the cab he'd been waiting for pulled up, William stepped out from the dark and climbed into the back seat.

The driver turned around. "Where to?"

William pulled the door shut. "Uptown. 1721 Audubon Court."

"Fare's gonna be about fifteen dollars. After dark, I gotta have the money up front."

"What?"

"Company policy." The cabbie shrugged. "A lot of drivers been getting stiffed."

William opened his wallet, pulled out a twenty and handed it across the seat. The driver took it and almost slipped it into his cash box, then took a second look at the bill. His face tightened. "What the hell is this?"

"Huh?"

With the bill stretched between his hands, the cabbie stared at it for a second then looked up at William. "You're either the dumbest counterfeiter who ever lived or you've been had."

"What you are talking about?"

The driver faced the bill toward William but didn't hand it back to him. "It's printed backwards."

William looked at the twenty-dollar bill in the man's hand. It looked like--it was--an almost brand new bill, nothing wrong

with it as far as he could tell.

"Get out of my cab," the driver said.

William didn't know what the man was talking about but knew he didn't want to get out. This cab was his only way home. He reached for the twenty. "If you don't like that one I've got another--"

The driver pulled his hands away. "I ain't giving this back. I got to turn it in to the police." He dropped one hand behind his seat back, then came up clutching a pistol, an old German Luger by the looks of it, the muzzle aimed straight at William's face. "In fact, I bet they give me a reward if I bring you in with it."

William jerked the door handle and rolled out into the street. He sprang to his feet and ran, the driver's yells just background noise. Has everyone gone crazy or is it just me?

Home. He had to get home.

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Rain. Driving, relentless rain. William was just two blocks from Fausto's. In two hours, that's as far as he'd gotten--one block an hour. Police cars prowled the neighborhood, shining spotlights into every nook and cranny, lighting up every shadow. Everyone in Fausto's knew his name. He'd been going there three or four nights a week after work for years. The cabbie had his address. William had given it to him

when he told the hack driver where to drop him.

Ten o'clock at night, with nowhere to go and no way to get there, William sat behind the closed Goodwill store, under an overhang that barely kept the rain off of him.

Huddled in the dark, head sunk between his knees, he hadn't heard anyone approach.

"You don't look so good."

Startled, William looked up, prepared to run again. It was the homeless man he'd knocked over outside the bar. The one with the shopping cart and the leathery skin. William relaxed a little. "Excuse me?"

The man pushed his cart closer. "You're not supposed to be here."

William looked around. "Why not?"

The old man grinned, half his teeth gone.

William found it nearly impossible to tell his age. The guy could be forty and maybe had lived a hard life, or perhaps he was a well-preserved seventy, pickled by a lifetime of booze. William waved him off, expecting a plea for money. "I can't help you."

The old man stopped just a few feet away. "Everything's out of place isn't it?" He had a strange lilting voice. Almost like an accent.

And he was right. Everything was out of place--from Johnny

Davis to the cab driver--everything was wrong.

Strapped to the back of the old man's shopping cart was a plastic sign about the size of a loaf of bread. William recognized the sign, the words, the colors, the logo of a local supermarket chain, all were familiar to him, but the letters were backward, unreadable.

Rainwater ran down William's face. He pointed to the sign. "Why's it written like that?"

The old man looked at the sign then back at William. "Like what?" he said, then shuffled away behind his basket.

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The rain came down even harder. William slouched in a darkened doorway across the street from Fausto's. Nothing made sense. Everything was messed up, backward, out of whack. Almost like this wasn't his home, like he was a stranger seeing it for the first time.

But that was crazy. He'd grown up here, gone to Brother Martin High School, dated Jenny Underhill who went to Cabrini, lost her to Johnny Davis, then got her back only to lose her again the first year of college to some kid who drove a Mustang. Two years later William married Marge at Saint Luke's. They had two kids.

This town was his home. He recognized it. He knew the people here, Big Johnny and Zeke, the bartender at Fausto's.

But things were different, little things. John Davis for one. In trying to help him, the big man had gotten himself killed. That wasn't John Davis--at least not the one William Bailey had known since seventh grade. Everything looked the same but wasn't. Nothing was quite right.

But they knew him--or someone like him.

A strange sensation crept over him that made the hair on the back of his neck rise. Maybe he didn't belong here. Maybe everything wasn't as it appeared. Maybe this wasn't his home. But if that were true, then whose home was it? Another thought, even scarier seeped through his brain. If he was here, who was there--at his home?

Crazy.

William dropped his head into his hands. Just considering such nonsense was a waste of time. Yet, here he was scanning the street, thinking of going back inside Fausto's, back to that mirror.

Not much time to think about it. The bar closed at three AM and it was already two-thirty. When he'd left--run for his life with Big Johnny--most of the mirror was still in the frame hanging on the wall.

Something about that damned mirror.

But Fausto's was dangerous, so a couple of hours ago William had found another mirror. In the men's room of a

twenty-four hour gas station. The Chevron on North Rampart.

He had approached it cautiously, afraid he was going mad. As he peered over the sink into the mirror, he saw what he always saw, his own reflection. Holding up his left hand, he looked at the image in the mirror, at the watch strapped to his wrist. He noticed that the man in the mirror wore his watch on his right hand. Just the opposite.

William stood in the gas station bathroom for twenty minutes before he worked up his nerve. Finally, he took a deep breath, leaned back, then slammed his forehead into the dirt-streaked mirror. The glass shattered and cut his head. Blood dribbled off the tip of his nose into the sink. His reflection stared out at him from the other side of the mirror, blood running down his face, too.

I have gone crazy!

So the gas station hadn't worked out. Ducking police cruisers, William had wandered the streets, his head reeling. What was he doing?

On the sidewalk, he found a sopping wet magazine that the wind had blown up against the side of a newspaper machine. The cover caught his eye. He picked it up. It was printed backwards, the letters reversed, words running right to left. The spine was on the right. As he flipped through the pages, he couldn't read a thing. Then William had an idea.

In the bathroom of an all night restaurant he held the wet magazine up to the mirror. Perfect. The reflected image was normal, spine on the left, words running left to right, all the letters printed correctly. He could read it clearly. But what did it mean?

Then he drove his head into that mirror. The glass cracked. Someone walked in, a skinny waiter wearing an apron. He stood gawking as William leaned over the sink with tears of pain filling his eyes.

The waiter looked at the broken mirror, then jabbed a finger at William's bloody forehead. "What the hell are you doing?"

"An accident," he mumbled, pressing his fingers against the fresh cut.

The waiter turned. "I'm calling the cops."

William Bailey ran.

Now he was huddled in the rain staring at Fausto's across the street. Because he had nowhere else to go.

He stood and walked toward Fausto's. When he was halfway across the street, a police car glided around the corner, headlights reflecting off the wet pavement. The cops in no hurry, just cruising. William forced himself to keep walking, not to run. One foot in front of the other. In the downpour, odds were that the cops wouldn't even recognize him.

But they did recognize him.

The police car slid to a stop as its high beams clicked on and its blue strobe lights started popping. Both front doors flew open.

Like a sinner seeking the sanctuary of a church, William ran straight for Fausto's door. As he burst inside, Zeke looked up from behind the bar. "William! What the hell are you doing here?"

He ignored the bartender, running right past him, eyes focused on the broken mirror and its busted frame hanging on the wall.

Zeke again, "The cops been looking all over for you. Say you killed two officers and--"

Behind him the front door banged against the wall.

"Police!" a voice behind him commanded. "Stop."

But William didn't stop. He kept running--running straight for the mirror. Reflected in its fragmented pieces he saw two uniformed police officers behind him, heard their boots pounding on the wooden floor. Just ten feet separated him from the mirror. At full speed he took two strides then dove. He stretched his arms out overhead and tucked his chin into his chest as his feet left the floor.

He felt one hand hit wall and the other strike broken glass. Then his head hit. More glass cracked, more skin split.

Darkness.

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William's eyes popped open. He was staring at the ceiling. Rough voices, even rougher hands. They rolled him over onto his stomach and jerked his arms behind his back. He felt cold steel on his wrists and heard the metallic ratcheting as the handcuffs tightened and bit into his skin.

He tilted his head up and rested his chin against the floor. Blood poured down the side of his face; he watched it pool on the floor then seep between the wooden planks. By rolling his eyes up he could just see the empty spot on the wall where the mirror had hung. Lying on the floor, three feet from his head, was the broken frame and the rest of the glass.

The two cops grabbed his arms and yanked him to his feet, sending waves of pain through his shoulders and wrists. As they spun him toward the door, one of the officers said, "You're under arrest."

"Why?" William asked.

The officer pressed his face into William's. "Murdering your family for starters."

"My...my family." William felt his stomach cinch and his bowels turn to ice. A thought he'd had earlier in the night echoed inside his head. If he was here, who was there--at his home.

As the cops dragged him across the floor, William glanced up and saw the rusted metal sign nailed above the door.

OUT.

He was home.

THE END