**Mirror, Mirror in the Hall**

*By John E. Heard*

Guess what? I just threw out my old diary, with the flowery cover and the silly, pointless entries. I’m starting a new one on a dark, rainy day which reflects my mood.

My name is Amanda. But my friends call me Mandy.

That is, the few friends I have left.

It’s amazing what can happen in just one year. At the end of 7th grade, last year, I was voted the “friendliest person” in my class and I even made the Honor Roll.

As a reward, my parents signed me up for soccer camp in July. My good friend Karen would come, too. The camp was located on a big lake in Vermont, far away from suburban Boston, where we live.

Life was turning out to be pretty good, which is not easy when you are in middle school. Even the annoying blemishes on my forehead had disappeared.

And then one day, Karen and her mom were shopping at the mall when they stopped for lunch at the deli. They were just about to sit down when Karen saw my dad in a booth. She started to walk over to say “hi” when she noticed a strange woman sitting next to him, rubbing his shoulder and holding his hand.

Karen was surprised and her mother quickly turned around and said, “Let’s get these sandwiches to go.”

I didn’t know any of this, of course. As a teenager, I was wrapped up in my own dramatic life. My time was taken up by homework, soccer, and a role in the winter play. And then there was Matt, a boy in my class who kissed me at the New Year’s Eve party at Karen’s house.

My head was spinning with happiness.

We learned a new word in English class this month. Mr. Jackson said “foreshadowing” was a literary term which meant a warning about a future event. Like a hint, he said.

But get this. I missed the foreshadowing within my family. My dad coming home late from work. His *sudden* business meetings on Saturdays. My pretty, picture-perfect mom missing her hair appointments. Even the dog sensed that something was wrong. He waited patiently by the door, ears drooping, hoping someone would take him for a walk.

One night, just before I fell asleep, I heard my mom talking loudly, “Everyone knows, half the school knows, her friends know. It just isn’t fair. We’ve protected her all these years, and now the wheels are coming off.”

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Wow! I made the 8th grade High Honor Roll – only one of a few students in my class to do so. But some of my friends made fun of me. I heard Matt, of all people, say that I was too brainy. How funny. That didn’t stop him from kissing me a few months ago. And, diary, I’ve not told anyone, but he had his hands all over me. And you know where, too.

Karen’s mom, who is always cheerful and pleasant, said to us one afternoon, “Beware of fair-weather friends. Teenagers usually repeat what their parents say at home so don’t take gossip, barbs, or taunts too seriously.”

Still, none of that well-intentioned advice was helping the situation. But one night my mom and I went for pizza and she told me a story.

“Your dad started his own business a few years ago. He left a big Boston firm that paid him well to go into business himself. However, he made some investment mistakes. Your father needed a bank loan to get him by for a few months. The banker turned out to be an attractive woman who saw an older, handsome man with debts and the need for help. He was vulnerable.”

My mother went on to describe this woman using words like ‘ensnare’ and ‘trap’ and the b-word that rhymes with witch. That language was very unlike her. My mom was hurt and frustrated.

But back to our dinner. One of the reasons why my mother is so slim is her diet. She has the discipline to stop at one slice of pizza. Imagine, one! When I finished my third slice, she leaned over and said, “Let’s take the last one home for the dog. He loves pepperoni.” That was her way of saying to me, “Enough.”

“Can I do anything to help with Dad?” I asked in the car, my voice quivering, with tears starting to streak down my face.

“Well, your father is a very vain man,” replied my mother. “He sometimes thinks more about himself than others, including us. That’s the problem. I’ve seen him stand in front of that big mirror in the front hallway for minutes before going to work. If you can think of anything, that would be wonderful. I expect he’ll listen to you. He’s aware that you are bright, sensitive, and caring.”

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Can you believe this, diary? In art class, we are doing a crazy project making a dress out of newspaper. Our teacher, Miss Patterson, said you can do anything with newsprint. The dress is going to be very cute, in shades of black and gray. No one else in town will have anything like it, she said with a grin.

That gave me an idea. With my teacher’s help, I made a silhouette image of two adults holding a child’s hand. A dog was sitting at their feet. I cut the newspaper into long, thin strips and used some felt to keep it together. I spent hours working on the details until my fingers hurt because of the small scissors I was using to cut the design.

Miss Patterson is a great teacher and, I feel, a kind person. She said, “I think this project is very important to you. Just ask if you need anything.” And that was that. She didn’t ask why I was doing it but I think she knew the reason.

Two weeks later I took the piece home and hid it in my closet.

By the way, I’ve learned that my mom and I can communicate silently. I guess it’s a female thing. I know when she is upset and when she is happy. One afternoon when I came home from school, she was putting some colorful flowers in a vase.

“Those are nice,” I said.

“Yes, they just came from the florist,” replied my mother. “They’re from your father,” she added. And then she hugged me.

So, diary even a thirteen-year-old can figure things out. That night, when everyone was sleeping I snuck downstairs and placed my silhouette creation on the full-length mirror in the hall.

The next morning, my parents were having coffee together. My dad reached over and took my hand.

“I didn’t know you were so talented. A good piece of artwork sends a message. When I looked in the mirror this morning, I saw a family. Together. Not just one person. I get the meaning. Your mom and I are planning to go to your soccer game tomorrow. How’s that for a start?”

Underneath the table, I could feel the dog’s wet nose nuzzle my foot.

The next day was our last game of the season. I usually went with Karen but my mom and dad drove me instead. We went as a family.

Our principal and some teachers, including Miss Patterson came out to support us, which was great considering it was a Saturday morning. The boys’ game finished just as ours was beginning so some of them hung around to watch us.

I like soccer more than other sports. The field is so big but sometimes we can hear the fans shouting. And here’s a little secret, diary.

It’s so embarrassing when a parent shouts out your name. Like “Hey, Ella, you can do better than that.” My teammate Ella didn’t speak to her father for a week.

Thankfully, my dad didn’t embarrass me when I heard his booming voice shout, “C’mon team, we need another goal.”

Was it luck or fate that Karen, my friend, and our best striker scored the winning goal with just a few seconds left? What a perfect finish to our season.

Over at the bench, it was chaos. Our friends were yelling and our teachers came over and hugged us. The principal was slapping my dad’s back.

Just as we were leaving the field, Matt, the boy who kissed me and then disappeared when I made the Honor Roll, casually strolled over and said, “Hey, I didn’t know you were such a good player.”

“Well,” I replied, “No one pays attention to the center-back position. And a good defense is a lot more about thinking than doing.”

There. I hope he got my message and I turned away.

Then Matt surprised me, just as my dad had done at breakfast yesterday.

“Now that soccer is over, do you think it’s possible,” he asked timidly, “if you could help me with my math?”