I have a secret.

I won’t tell Benny and the other boys. They are like dogs in the night, snarling at anything that moves, chasing cats along country lanes just for the thrill of watching them run. I won’t tell Anna, either, even though she is nice to me and shares her coloured pencils, even the turquoise one that is her favourite because it reminds her of the sea near her home. Sister Constance tells me that Anna could die soon and I should be careful and quiet around her. Around Anna I have to tiptoe, I have to pretend that everything is OK, I have to keep secrets to myself.

But I’ll tell you.

This is my secret: there are winged horses that live in the mirrors of Briar Hill hospital.
Anna is asleep again.

I don’t wish to wake her, so I lie at the foot of her bed and quietly draw on the backs of the war pamphlets Sister Constance keeps in a stack by the fireplace for the groundsman, Thomas, to use as kindling for the wood he has chopped. There is a gilt mirror above Anna’s chest of drawers. It reflects the mirror-me. The mirror-Anna, snoring. The mirror-room, with its wool blankets strung over the window to hide our lights from outside at night.
And standing in the mirror-doorway is a winged horse that isn't in Anna’s room at all. The mirror-horse is nosing through the half-finished cup of tea that Anna left on her bedside table. He has a soft grey muzzle that is beaded with droplets of tea, and quick-silver hooves, and snow-white wings folded tightly. It’s hard to capture with a pencil how horse ears are both round and pointy at the same time.

Benny comes in and sneers at my drawing. His thin red hair, combed back with a wide parting down the middle, and his sharp hungry eyes make me think of hounds that are always looking for something to make a meal of.

“Horses don’t have horns,” he says.

“Those are its ears.”

“They don’t have wings, either.”

My hand tightens around the pencil. “Some of them do.”

Benny rolls his eyes. “Ha, and Bog is actually a dragon, even though he looks like a flea-bitten old collie.”

Anna wakes then, and tells Benny to leave, and he does because Anna is the oldest and because she asks him nicely.

“Come here, Emmaline,” Anna says, “and show me what you’ve drawn.”

She wraps her cardigan around my shoulders as I crawl into bed next to her and gives me a tight squeeze, as snug as if I were home. “What lovely creatures,” she says as she inspects my drawing. “You’ve such an imagination.”
She smiles warmly, but she smells sour, like milk left outside too long. Her face is very pale, except for the places where it is so red it looks chapped, even though it has been many weeks since she has been outside.

I glance at the mirror.

The winged horse has grown bored with Anna’s tea and is backing out of the mirror-room, bumping his bottom against the tight angles of the mirror-hallway. I cover my mouth to keep from giggling. Anna can’t see the winged horses in the mirrors.

No one can – only me, and I will never forget the first time I saw them.

It was late summer when I first arrived at Briar Hill. Sister Constance took me straight to her office and removed the identification tag pinned to my coat. While she made notes in a ledger, I tried to smooth my tufts of hair in the mirror above her desk. Then completely out of nowhere, completely without warning, a winged horse clomped straight through the mirror-doorway, prim as anything, tail held high, as though Sister Constance’s office was the exact place he was looking for.

“A horse!” I yelled, pointing at the mirror. He was snuffling around Sister Constance’s desk. “With wings! And he’s eating your ruler!”

Sister Constance gave me a look like I’d said Winston Churchill was holding a pink umbrella while riding an elephant across occupied France.
“There!” I pointed to the mirror again. “Now he’s got your pencil!”

She turned to the mirror.

She looked back at me.

She called for the doctor.

Dr Turner came and felt my forehead, and they spoke quietly to each other by the windows, while I tapped my finger against the mirror, again and again and again, like I used to do with the live fish in the tanks at the fishmonger’s. The horse didn’t turn. He didn’t glance at me at all. He just leaned against the blackboard and fell asleep, while outside Sister Constance’s door I heard the other children whispering about me.

“Emmaline?” Anna asks. “What are you giggling about?”

I look away from the winged horse with tea on his muzzle. Anna coughs, pressing her hankie to her mouth. Something stirs in my lungs, too, still and thick as swamp water. It makes me think of the expression Mama uses when Papa teases me for being sul-len. She’ll look up from her book with a smile and say, Leave her be, Bill. There’s mystery in the quiet ones. Still waters run deep.

And this – this liquid, this sickness – there is nothing in the world that could run deeper.

“Emmaline?” Anna squeezes my shoulder.

“It’s nothing.”

Anna hands me back my drawing. With my thick pink rubber, I rub away the ears that I’ve drawn wrong.
“You like horses, don’t you?” she asks. Even with her cough, her voice is gentle.

I blow away the rubber marks. I start to redraw the ears. Benny is daft if he thinks they look like horns.

“We had horses at the bakery to deliver the bread.” I add a little tuft of hair coming from its ear. “A big gelding and two bay mares. Nutmeg, Dusty and Ginger. They were beautiful. They had sandy brown hair and dark manes. They wouldn’t ever come when the bakery boys called to them, but they never ran away from me.”

“I guess horses can tell a lot about people,” Anna says.

I look up at her. Her eyebrows knit together. It is the same look that Sister Constance gets when she goes into the kitchen pantry to count the dusty cans of tinned ham. There are fewer and fewer of them each week.

“You must miss them terribly,” Anna says, reaching out to brush back my hair. “I’m sure once you go home they’ll come right up to their stable doors, begging for an apple.” She starts coughing again, but pretends it’s just a tickle and takes a sip of cold tea. “You can tell them stories about these flying horses in your drawings. Perhaps, long ago, they were cousins.”

I stop drawing.

Anna is looking towards the window, as though something has caught her eye. When Dr Turner told her she couldn’t leave her bed again, the Sisters pinned back a corner of the hanging wool blanket so that she could open the window for fresh air. In the hand
mirror propped on her bedside table there’s a flicker of movement. A winged horse is passing by in the mirror-world outside. I can catch only a glimpse of him in the sliver of the open window panes. He stretches his wings like he’s been asleep all morning. Anna’s eyes jerk towards the mirror. Her eyebrows knit together again, more curiously this time.

Has she seen it?
Has she seen the winged horse?

After that first day in Sister Constance’s office, I haven’t spoken of the winged horses again – except secretly, just a little, to Anna. Everyone else sniggers at me behind my back, but Anna would never do that.

And for a moment, as she studies the mirror, I think she might see the horse, too.

But then she sighs and adjusts the clip in her hair, then flips open her *Young Naturalist’s Guide to Flora and Fauna* to one of the many dog-eared pages. She looks up, giving me one of her warm, soft Anna smiles. But she can’t muffle her cough with a handkerchief this time. It makes the whole bed shake.
Sister Constance has made a new rule. It happened after Benny found one of the chickens torn apart in the yard. He came yelling into the kitchen with the dead bird, making its dead wings flap, shaking its dead head, sending Sister Mary Grace into the pickling room in tears. Sister Mary Grace is the youngest nurse, in charge of cooking and cleaning. She’s not that much older than Anna, and Anna would cry too, if she saw a dead, bloody bird. Then Sister Constance scolded Benny and told Thomas to bury the bird in the grassy patch of land behind the barn, while she drummed on a tea tin at lunch to get our attention.

“No children are allowed beyond the kitchen terrace, on account of the foxes,” she said.

But after lunch, I sneak beyond the terrace anyway.
I want to watch Thomas bury the bird. The others are scared of him, though he is only twenty – still young. Benny says he is a monster. But Sister Constance says God gave Thomas only one arm for a reason, and that reason was so that he couldn't go and fight the Germans like the other young men in the village, so that he would stay here with us, in the hospital, and take care of the chickens and the sheep and the turnips, so that we would have vitamins to keep us strong. I know that Sister Constance can't lie because she's a nun, but sometimes, I'm scared of Thomas, too. Which is why I hide behind the woodpile while I watch him bury the dead chicken.

It's the start of December and the ground is hard, and it must be difficult for him to dig with one arm, but he manages. Where the other arm should be there is only a sleeve fastened to his shoulder with a big silver nappy pin. He lays the dead chicken in the hole. As he thinks no one is looking, he runs his fingers over the chicken's white, white feathers. I wonder if it feels the same under his fingers as it would on mine, if soft feathers feel the same for Benny and Anna and Sister Constance and Thomas and me, or if it's only beneath my hands that chickens feel warm and alive, like stones left in the sun.

Then Thomas buries the bird under red dirt, and the bird is gone.