

Who is the Fairest of Them All?

The house is quiet now, it settles and breathes out beneath me. I can relax whilst they're not here. I'm sure they'll be back. People think that because I'm old, I don't understand what's going on, but they have no idea. I see everything.

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There is a mewling and crying, a raw scraping like the cat caught in the gardener's mole snare. The noise is coming from the lady's bedroom. From my place at the top of the stairs I can see the corner of the landing where the man of the house is pacing outside the door. They won't let him in. Water is pooling on the steps, sloshed from a basin lip by the harried housemaid. Silence thickens like sauce on the hob. The doctor isn't here, nobody called for him. There is movement at the bedroom door and the man is stepping back. The housemaid rushes from the stifling copper taint of the overheated room and past me, quickly returning with the cook. What on earth they need cook in there for I have no idea. It's a roomful of women now, the only men in the house are outside the closed door and outside the kitchen window, where cook's eldest brother waits. He covers and uncovers greased black hair with his cap, eyes dark with not knowing. Both men are walking and waiting, one upstairs and one downstairs. Neither knows yet if the disappointment will be theirs.

The bedroom door is opening and the man of the house swims in as cook swims out holding a bundle tightly against her aproned bosom. She is shaking her head to the man and from inside the room there is crying again, only this time it is not a rasping newborn, but the lady of the house, diminished.

Cook pauses at the top of the stairs to gather her skirts with one hand. I see the swaddled baby open its eyes and they are as black as coal, the hair dark and silky thick, and the baby looks directly into me, into its own reflection. I know this is the beginning of the secret. Cook is running down the stairs on surprisingly deft feet, and out through the kitchen door where she hands the bundle to her pacing brother and he is crying and looking and they all hold together, shocked. The brother sets off around the back of the house down the lane where he still lives with his mother and younger siblings, some still at school, but most in service in other, paler houses.

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Everyone has been wearing black all week. The house is held darkened under cloth like a silenced parrot. The lady is up and out of bed, on occasion taking walks down to the bottom of the orchard. There is a patch of newly turned earth there. Sometimes the man accompanies her, but she returns alone, skirts dirtied in the mud.

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No-one can find the lady. Tea was due to be served half an hour ago, but she isn't sewing in the sitting room. She is vanished. I know where she is, but no-one ever asks me. No-one has thought to look outside. Cook is startled by a single knock at the window; leaving the jam boiling she follows her solemn brother down to the dirt patch where the lady is scrabbling on the ground. Tears fall on a clump of violets she is trying to plant in stony mud. Cook's brother and cook help her up and back to the house, until the housemaid comes out to take his place. Cook's brother melts away as the jam burns.

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Another baby comes. She carries this one over the winter and it is birthed in the bedroom. This one has pale skin and pale hair and the man is proud. I hear cook tell him it looks just like the one that was lost. Only a few of us know that is a lie. The man is pleased he has mended the broken past. When he looked into me at the top of the stairs, I told him he was a fool, but he didn't listen. Some people only see what they want to see. He will learn.

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It has started to snow. The house is so cold that someone even painted the inside of the windows last night. Jack Frost is the one who does that. I don't remember letting him in, but sometimes people slide underneath the doors. I've seen them.

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She is talking to herself again, a half-whispered singsong of nonsense. As she passes me on the landing I look hard at her, showing my displeasure at the choice she made. Every baby deserves a life no matter how black its eyes, and it is wrong of her to deceive the man like this. Each time she looks at me I show her her wickedness and she loses a little more of her mind. Soon she will forget that her dark-eyed child is growing in the cottage in the village and will believe she actually lies under the dirt. She deserves to feel this.

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The man has gone from the house. He left in a uniform when others came to collect him. The postman brings letters from France, but the lady puts them on the mantelpiece, unread. I am worried they might fall into the fire, but she has little concern. She moves as if underwater, slowed. Her pale daughter, Viola, is beginning to adopt these mannerisms too, drifting through rooms without leaving an impression, taking on quiet hobbies, reading and sewing. She rejects musical tuition, alarmed to leave a noise. Her mother loses sight of her and both begin to fold inward, separately.

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Cook's brother is here again. He ran up to the house when he heard the news, but it was no use. The telegram said, 'Lost At Sea', but the man was lost to his lady wife a long time ago. She is still underwater. She no longer paddles, instead floating through dark reedy days, barely surfacing. Cook's brother cannot reach her. When they were together before, there were sparks of love, secret moth murmurs and fingertip brushes. Only once was there the hurried connection on the floor in the sitting room, urgency and longing spilling out under skirts and buttons. She briefly stroked his skin, so different to her husband's, and after he had gone she cried and knew that she could never live properly now. Once was enough. She looked at herself as she passed me on the stairs and I told her how it could be, but she wasn't brave enough. Some of them aren't.

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There is a knock at the door and an air of excitement amongst the staff. The pale daughter has a pale suitor, and today he is taking her on a boating lake. She is unable to swim and a little afraid but knows he is her chance to leave. I look at her for the last time as she steps down the stairs, and I feel it is a shame that it will inevitably end here.

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Today is another black day. The lady does not cry. I hear the staff talking about her after the service, how she stood at the empty graves side by side, father and daughter, looking without seeing, imagining their bodies in the watery depth. Cook finds it difficult to console her. The patch of bare soil under the tree at the bottom of the orchard has been reclaimed by weeds long ago. No-one goes there now. Few know it too is vacant – they choose not to be reminded it is there at all.

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The house is filled with emptiness. Sometimes I forget that the lady is still here. She makes no noise as she slowly passes, her reflection is fading. I was disturbed this morning by a scratching at the window, but it is only the blackberry brambles enquiring against the glass. She does not see them. She is barely alive.

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She has been dead and alone for several weeks. I keep an eye on her body as it passes through the indignity of rank smells and wet decomposition before it begins to desiccate. There was not much of her to begin with – she began to dry out when the staff left. Cook was the last to go. She too was elderly, and the money had ended years before. All that remained was the house – men in brown overalls came to collect the clocks and the dining table and the chandeliers. They tried to take me, but I clung to the wall with my fingers of brass screws. I am this house. I'll deal with the next ones when they get here.

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There are more years.

There are more others.

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There is another sign on a stick in the garden. I watch the man from the van trying to put it up, but the brambles do their job and keep him on the other side of the wall. In the end he nailed it clumsily to the gate post, but I was pleased when the vines tapped and told me of the smears on his trousers, how the blackberry juice mixed with his blood from pricked fingertips and stained the painted white wood of the sign. That'll show them.

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It is Autumn again. There is a plump, shiny man with a clipboard in the hallway. He has glanced up here but not been to see me. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt – he has not yet realised it is my house.

I hear a car stop and a door slam, and the man moves towards the door. It opens onto a woman with eyes as black as coal and a dark, silky rope of hair. She seems familiar, back from the dead. She has not been in this house before. I watch as she steps gently over the threshold. The shiny man does not speak. He moves aside as she walks along cold tiles, busies himself with his phone as she explores the downstairs rooms. I steel myself to show her reflection as she

passes, and she smiles at me. It is the second time I have seen eyes as dark as hers. All will be well.

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There are others here. She has come here to live, and she has brought others. I hear them downstairs. The woman has a man with her, a man with beautiful skin and fierce hair. He walked past me on the landing and I reflected him directly, true and strong and proud of his family. I will allow him to stay. The girl children have surprised me. Here they come – the first one up the stairs is a replicant of her mother, smiling and shining and glowing with youth. She rakes her fingers through a dark fringe as she passes me, acknowledging yet not lingering, recognising my purpose and position in this house. She is quickly opening doors into rooms, putting her head in and out like a jack in the box, sure of herself and trusting her quick decisions. I like her.

She enters the end bedroom, the one with two windows, and I hear her feet on the boards as she walks to the window. There is a scrape of stiffened sash as she raises it four inches and puts her mouth to the gap.

“Lily!”

Our silence is broken as she calls out to the garden. I am startled by the youthful sound – it is not unpleasant, but unknown. It will take some getting used to.

Back in the hallway there is a softer tread. The first girl runs down to the half landing, greeting her sister. Side by side, the twins walk up the stairs. As they approach, I look again, unable to make sense of what I see. Both are the same height, weight, build, and have the same features - undeniably sisters. Yet whilst Poppy’s eyes reflect the deep black centres of her flowery namesake, Lily’s eyes are as pale as her skin. Her hair is blond and disappearing at the edges, her freckled skin reflected in my speckled glass. None of them know why she is the only white duckling in this family. None of them ask.

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It is Christmas, and the house is full of warm smells and light. There is a party, and during the evening I finally see her, the baby who was not underground. She is an aged woman now, almost a century old. Her once black hair is iron grey. She rises carefully up the stairs towards me, trembling hand on the rail, and I know in an instant that I will show her her mother just once. After all, it was me who punished those who made the wrong choice years ago, I have a

role here. I wait until I am sure it is her, until I hear someone calling, “Tea, Violet!” from below the stairs and then I know. I will give her the answers, she will want them. But people don’t seem to matter about such things now. It’s all strange to me.

She’s nearly on the top step, it has taken her a while to walk up the stairs on her aged legs. As she approaches and glances at her reflection, I show her. She stops and looks at the image of her unknown mother in the mirror. She touches the blond hair wonderingly, the translucent skin, she holds her hand to the blue veins on her neck. I see her notice the shape of her body fill the pale reflection perfectly; she turns, holding out her arms and lifting her chin to look directly into blue eyes. Raising fingertips to the mirror, she reaches out to touch herself, to connect with her mother and her secret past, just once. As she connects with the glass I let go of the lady’s image and return the reflection of Violet’s centenarian self and she looks, but not with disappointment, as her mother did.

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Three generations of them live here with me now. I don’t interfere with this family much, they seem to get on without me. Sometimes, secretly, I show the youngest girls who they are, but never when they are looking. I wait until they are walking away from me, high ponytails swinging, and I lay their retreating reflections one on top of the other, dark over blonde over dark over blonde, until I can see no difference. I’ll get used to them. After all, some of them get used to me.