

The House, the Spider, and the Child, Ray Bradbury

The House, the Spider, and the Child

The House was a puzzle inside an enigma inside a mystery, for it encompassed silences, each one different, and beds, each a different size, some having lids. Some ceilings were high enough to allow flights with rests where shadows might hang upside down. The dining room nested thirteen chairs, each numbered thirteen so no one would feel left out of the distinctions such numbers implied. The chandeliers above were shaped from the tears of souls in torment at sea five hundred years lost, and the basement cellar kept five hundred vintage-year bins and strange names on the wine tucked therein and empty cubbies for future visitors who disliked beds or the high ceiling perches.

A network of webways was used by the one and only spider dropping down from above and up from below so the entire House was a sounding spinneret tapestry played on by the ferociously swift Arach, seen one moment by the wine bins and the next in a plummeting rush to the storm-haunted garret, swift and soundless, shutting the webs, repairing the strands.

How many rooms, cubicles, closets, and bins in all? No one knew. To say one thousand would exaggerate, but one hundred was nowhere near truth. One hundred and fifty nine seems an agreeable amount, and each was empty for a long while, summoning occupants across the world, yearning to pull lodgers from the clouds. The House was a ghost arena, yearning to be haunted. And as the weathers circled Earth for a hundred years, the House became known, and across the world the dead who had lain down for long naps sat up in cold surprise and wished for stranger occupations than being dead, sold off their ghastly trades and prepared for flight.

All of the autumn leaves of the world were shucked and in rustling migrations, hovered mid-America and sifted down to clothe the tree which one moment stood bare and the next was ornamented with

autumn falls from the Himalayas, Iceland, and the Capes, in blushed colors and funeral somber array, until the tree shook itself to full October flowering and burst forth with fruit not unlike the cut gourds of All Hallows.

At which time ...

Someone, passing on the road in dark Dickensian storms, left a picnic basket by the front iron gate. Within the basket something wailed and sobbed and cried.

The door opened and a welcoming committee emerged. This committee consisted of a female, the wife, extraordinarily tall, and a male, the husband, even taller and gaunter, and an old woman of an age when Lear was young, whose kitchen boiled with only kettles and in the kettles soups better left from menus, and it was these three who bent to the picnic basket to fold back the dark cloth over the waiting babe, no more than a week or two old.

They were astonished at his color, the pink of sunrise and daybreak, and the sound of his respiration, a spring bellows, and the beat of his fisting heart, no more than a hummingbird's caged sound, and on impulse the Lady of the Fogs and Marshes, for that is how she was known across the world, held up the smallest of mirrors which she kept not to study her face, for that was never seen, but to study the faces of strangers should something be wrong with them.

"Oh, look," she cried, and held the mirror to the small babe's cheek, and Lo! there was total surprise.

"Curse all and everything," said the gaunt, pale husband. "His face is reflected!"

"He is not like us!"

"No, but still," said the wife.

The small blue eyes looked up at them, repeated in the mirror glass.

"Leave it," said the husband.

And they might have pulled back and left it to the wild dogs and feral cats, save that at the last instant, the Dark Lady said "No!" and reached to lift, turn, and deliver the basket, babe and all, up the path and into the House and down the hall to a room that became on the instant the nursery, for it was covered on all four walls and topmost ceiling with images of toys put by in Egyptian tombs to nurse the play of pharaohs' sons who traveled a thousand-year river of darkness and had need of joyous instruments to fill dark time and brighten their mouths. So all about on the walls capered dogs, cats; here too were depicted wheatfields to plow through to hide, and loaves of mortality bread and sheaves of green onions for the health of the dead children of some sad pharaoh. And into this tomb nursery came a bright child to stay at the center of a cold kingdom.

And touching the basket, the mistress of the winter-autumn House said, "Was there not a saint with a special light and promise of life called Timothy?"

"Yes."

"So," said the Dark Lady, "lovelier than saints, which stops my doubt and stills my fear, not saint, but Timothy he is. Yes, child?"

And hearing his name, the newcomer in the basket gave a glad cry.

Which rose to the High Attic and caused Cecy in the midst of her dreams to turn in her tidal sleep and lift her head to hear that strange glad cry again which caused her mouth to shape a smile. For while the House stood strangely still, all wondering what might befall them, and as the husband did not move and the wife leaned down half wondering what next to do, Cecy quite instantly knew that her travels were not enough, that beginning now here, now there with seeing and hearing and tasting there must be someone to share it all and tell.

And here the teller was, his small cry giving announcement to the feet that no matter what might show and tell, his small hand, grown strong and wild and quick, would capture it and scribble it down. With this assurance sensed, Cecy sent a gossamer of silent thought and welcome to reach the babe and wrap it round and let it know they were as one. And foundling Timothy so touched and comforted gave off his crying

and assumed a sleep that was a gift invisible. And seeing this, the frozen husband was given to smile.

And a spider, heretofore unseen, crept from the blanketings, probed all the airs about, then ran to fasten on the small child's hand as nightmare papal ring to bless some future court and all its shadow courtiers, and held so still it seemed but stone of ebony against pink flesh.

And Timothy, all unaware of what his finger wore, knew small refinements of large Cecy's dreams.

The End