

The Fall of Night

The room is dark but the dying embers give enough light for Cassandra to see what she's doing. She slides the framed photograph from her bedside table into the pocket of her dressing gown and slips quietly out the nursery door. Her bare feet are silent in the cavernous corridor and no light seeps between the drapes at the windows. It is a moonless night. At the end of the hall, she stops facing a door. Silently, she pushes it open and creeps in. She makes her way to the bed and stands above the pillow, picture raised.

Earlier that day:

Cassandra stands straight-backed in the breakfast room, her dress tied so tightly she can hardly catch a breath. Her white blonde hair is brushed away from her face and tied in a neat plait, fastened at the end with a ribbon. A muscle beneath her eye twitches as she stands so still, waiting. The door swings open and a breathy laugh signifies the entrance of her mother and father; the pair practically float in, preening and swinging off each other's arms, chatting merrily. As they take their seats at the breakfast table, they notice Cassandra and the smiles slide off their faces.

"Darling, why..." she falters, a forced smile on her plump, pouty lips

"You requested we bring her down for breakfast today, mum, as it's her birthday" Ruth smiles nervously.

"Ah yes, of course. Sit down darling." She smiles coldly at Cassandra and indicates the seat farthest from herself. Ruth leads her charge to the indicated seat and settles her on the hard chair before ladling porridge onto her plate.

"That will be all Ruth, thank you." Cecilia says, stirring a lump of sugar into her tea. Ruth curtsies and exits the room. Now the room is silent but for the occasional clatter of silverware against china.

Cassandra hasn't taken a single bite of food and sits in stony silence, surveying the people who sit before her. Her mouth twitches into a strange smile. She doesn't see them much, maybe eight times a year, on holidays and birthdays and when they need to put on appearances for visitors, not counting the nights when her father was feeling particularly pent-up or cruel.

"Don't smile like that Cassandra, it's very unbecoming," her mother scolds from behind her tea cup. Cassandra allows the smile to fade. Her father, who has remained entirely silent since entering the room, looks up from his paper suddenly and gives her a scanning look.

"It's unfortunate she didn't get your looks, isn't it Cecelia" he states, folding his paper and taking a swill of coffee. This earns a flirtatious look from her mother. Cassandra drops her gaze to her plate and digs a hole in the centre of the mound of porridge.

Silence ensues and still Cassandra doesn't eat. At half past nine Ruth comes again and returns her to the nursery where Ruth settles by the fire with her mending. Cassandra finds her knitting and curls herself into the window seat. As she knits, snow falls outside the window and her mind goes back to her favourite daydream of fighting back against her father during one of his night-time visits.

At night the library is warm and heavy with laughter, various relatives and family friends gather around, chatting and drinking. Ruth gives Cassandra a gentle shove and she stumbles awkwardly into the room. No one notices her presence as she sits down at the fire, near enough to the flames that a few sparks land on her white dress and burn little holes into it. She stays silent, listening to snippets of their boring conversations. She doesn't pay much attention until she hears her father's voice and glimpses him leaning confidentially towards one of his sisters, Mary.

"Such a dreadful child, she hasn't said a word to me all day. Poor Cecilia finds her unbearably sullen. I suppose we ought to find a heavy handed governess to knock some sense into that silly head of hers." Mary nods along smoothly. "If she weren't such an unbearable thing to look at maybe I could tolerate her" Her father lights a cigar.

Suddenly, it becomes too much. She reaches into the fire and pulls a glowing ember from it. She clutches it tightly in her fist. It burns into her palm and she lets out a small whine of pain, squeezing her eyes shut.

"What is she doing!" Mary asks suddenly, standing up.

"You wicked child! Somebody find Ruth!" her mother cries, jumping away from her daughter. Cassandra drops the ember. Ruth hurries towards her, and, with the help of Cassandra's father, the pair of them manage to get her up to the nursery.

"What are we to do with her, sir?" Ruth asks, staring uncomfortably at the girl.

"You be the judge of that for now. I'll see to her tomorrow" Cassandra's father leaves and Ruth is left with the job of calming and bandaging the wild ten year old.

Eventually, Ruth manages to calm her and leaves her to sleep but Cassandra lies awake, her mind running on double time. Once she is certain everyone is in dreamland, she climbs out of her bed and takes a photograph, an old family portrait, and quietly exits the shadowy nursery. Cassandra creeps into her father's room. In the dark, she raises the wooden framed photograph above her head and brings it down on his sleeping face. The glass shatters and she feels his blood rush over her hand, he moves weakly, and she falls to the floor, glass shards crunch beneath her and break the surface of her skin. She stays still and prays that he is dead.