

Mirror Mirror

by Jessica Breheny

Wicked Stepmother

This horrifies me because the mirror never tells a lie. The hunter has betrayed me. I am the woman in the honest mirror, the woman in the witch cave making poison. At night I go into the forest to look for her, to strangle her snow white neck with her own dark hair. She is seven and soon to be married. I am brier hearted. I am old. I plait my hair like a queen, but I am the wicked stepmother, wicked new wife, wicked witch. I live in a secret room with mushrooms and bats, skeletons and roots, pitchers and pipes. When I fly I have no legs. I hold out apples for my guests. Every night I set out to study fear.

When I was a little girl I was wild and mean. I bit the breasts of my wet nurse. When I was Snow White's age, I went to an old woman's house. She lived in a circle of stones. She said, what a royal little girl. She said, I'm cold. She turned me into a log. She threw me on the fire and laughed while I burned. She said, what a bad little girl. She said, no prince would want to marry such a mannerless ugly wild princess.

I am dancing at a ball in hot iron shoes. Ladies and knights dance by me with goblets in their hands. Musicians play. Soldiers line the halls. Dwarves pull me up when I fall down. Dwarves tend to the seven year old bride who's not even old enough to have her hair brushed without crying.

Snow White

Stepmother dances in hot iron shoes. The dwarves, the prince, all of us, watch. We tell her, stop dancing and we'll cut off your head. We tell her, sit down and we'll cut off your arms. So she dances and collapses dead on the stone floor, her head and arms still on.

Then the music stops, the food is gone, the musicians retire to their quarters, and up the stairs we go, followed by servants and the king. In the morning we will need to show the blood on the sheet, like the blood that fell onto the snow and made me. The prince huffs and puffs. Everyone stands outside the canopy. I can hear the king breathe fast, then faster, through the velvet. He smells like dead skin. The servants hang the white sheet with a crest of blood outside the window. It is the flag of my chastity.

There are no children. The prince comes to my bed almost every night, and to my sewing closet almost every day. The king says he'll be damned if he's going to let his line dry up just like blowing out a candle, so he comes to me. He says, my son doesn't have enough ink to draw the family tree. He rubs his beard full of crumbs and sauce against my cheek. His teeth look like twigs.

But the tree is still dying and the king says it's me. A rotten apple, he says. Pretty on the outside, empty on the inside. The prince says, she's not even bleeding yet. Give her a few years. But the king says, another. Bring another. The prince says, she was prettier in her coffin anyway.

They give me a head start into the game woods. The hunter will count to ten before he sets out with the dogs. I hear the barking getting closer. The forest animals don't help me the way they did before. I've lost the privilege of virgins. I trip over roots, over branches, over my own skirts. A dog with bared teeth is right behind me when I see the clearing, the circle, the house.

I run in without knocking. An old woman sits in a rocking chair next to a fire. She says, warm yourself. She says, pay no attention to those dogs. She says, what a nice little princess. Curtains of cobwebs cover the windows. Shelves of bottles and jars line the walls. The room smells like boiled cabbage. She says, you are empty. She says, you are fallen fruit. She says, I am cold. She turns me into

a log and throws me on the fire. When I am done burning, I am old. My hands are dried apricots.

My father's castle is now a ruin. I walk over broken stones, past rows of armor and portraits, to Stepmother's closet. Behind a spinning wheel and a shelf of needles is her secret room. I look in the mirror on the wall and I am young again, seven, maybe eight. Fairest, it says. It's the voice of the old woman. It says, thou art the fairest in this hall, but the prince's new bride is the fairest of them all. When I touch my cheeks they are old persimmons. In the mirror they are summer apples.

I practice my art. The mirror tells me how. Mix this with that. Stir to the right, then to the left. If it is bile-colored you have done it right. I wait. When I am hungry, I go to the game woods and find the remains of rabbits and deer. At night I fly to watch the new princess. Then, just like that, the king dies and she is pregnant and queen. I go to her in her sleep and pour the potion in her ear. A few days later she is dead from childbirth.

When the prince who is now king sees me so old with a cartful of bottles and the mirror, he says, what is this peddler woman doing in my castle? I say, I am your wife. He says, no wife of mine. I hold up the mirror and show him my young face. He says, you can take one of the servants' rooms.

I find a secret room underneath the castle and set up my workshop. Every day the princess is bigger and every day more beautiful. I want to pull out each of her black hairs. The mirror says, eat her heart and liver and you will be as fair as she. I go to the hunter's house at the edge of the wood and tell him what to do. I say, if you don't, I will cut off your arms and legs and leave you out to be eaten alive by wild boars.

I know as soon as I see them, raw on a silver plate, these are the organs of a hart. The hunter has betrayed me. I have the soldiers dismember him and leave him by the river. I don't need to ask the mirror. She is with the dwarves. She will cook their food, mend their clothes, sweep their floor. They will tell her not to answer the door, that I will try to trick her. They know me so well by now.

She is easily tricked. I comb her hair with a poisoned brush, I tie her bodice so tight she can't breathe, I feed her the poisoned apple. But a prince falls in love with her dead body and she wakes up.

I try to fly away, but the hot iron shoes keep me on the ground. As I fall I grab the princess by the braid. I tell her, let down your ladder hair so I can climb up. I tell her, you are on your death bed and already I can hear your cold footsteps on the garden floor. I tell her, and you lived happily ever after. It is a curse, and now she knows it.

